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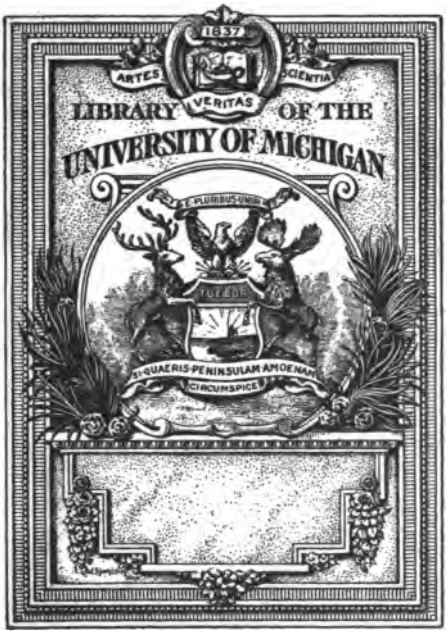
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THE

VIKINGS OF THE BALTIC

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A Tale of the North in the Tenth Century.

BY

G. W. DASENT, D.C.L.,

AUTHOR OF "ANNALS OF AN EVENTFUL LIFE," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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THE

VIKINGS OF THE BALTIC.

CHAPTER I.

A MESSAGE FROM KING SWEYN.

Beorn and Vagn had not been at home a week, and the 10th of October was past, when the warder on the arch descried a ship upon the sea, plainly making for the harbour. He sounded his horn, and Sigvald and the captains were soon in the look-out tower.

The wind was strong and contrary, and the sea high; the strange sail, therefore, had to beat up to make the haven, and even as it was, it was doubtful whether she would fetch it.

As she ran in nearer on her gaining board, they saw that she was no long-ship, no vessel of war, but a keel or buss, one of those merchant ships built rather for burden than for speed, one of those in which, in fact, Beorn

had wished he could have been when that storm in Calmar Sound overtook him.

"A trading ship!" said Sigvald; "and making straight for a Viking harbour! The lamb will next seek shelter in the wolf's den!"

"Nor is it stress of weather that drives her hither," said Bui. "These men are trying to make the harbour at the risk of their lives. If she be driven on the shallows, right or left of the harbour fairway, the mews and fish will have a dainty meal."

It was in the afternoon when the ship was thus descried, and after watching her for a while, Sigvald said—

"'Twill be hours yet before she can run in. Sound your horn, warder, if she comes to harm; and sound it twice, as is your duty, when she is off the port, if she ever gets so far, that the iron gates may be thrown open, and that she may run in in peace. By that time we shall be at supper in the hall. Send the Captain thither to me."

It was now dark, and the Viking chiefs were gathered as usual in their hall. Side by side

with her husband sat Astrida on a sort of double high seat, while over against him sat Bui, the second in command.

You had only to look on that pair to see that they were completely happy, and Astrida seemed not to feel that she was cut off from the rest of her sex, with the exception of her waiting women. There the two sat, conversing lovingly together; and though some of the Vikings, like Beorn, thought this was a strange position for their captain to be in, neither Sigvald nor Astrida appeared to be in the least aware of it themselves.

In the enjoyment of the feast, few, it is probable, remembered the toiling ship which had so long been struggling with the waves; or if they did, it was with the old Lucretian feeling of comfort that they were not exposed to the buffets of the waves in such wild weather.

All at once this feeling of forgetfulness and of ease was interrupted by the well-known blast of the warder's horn, which showed that the stranger had either been lost, or had made the port.

"Mark the note, dearest," said Sigvald.

"It means life or death to the men in that ship."

Again the warder blew his blast, and then all knew that the ship was safe, and off the port; for two blasts in rapid succession were the signal to the harbour-master to throw open the iron gates.

"She is safe," said Sigvald, returning to his conversation with Astrida.

"Safe! safe! and soon in port!" ran round the hall, and then the feast went on as before.

After a while—it might be half-an-hour, or less—the sentinel at the gate, a tall Viking, who stalked up and down on guard, broad-axe in hand, ushered in a stranger, who was passed on from thrall to thrall till the butler—for Sigvald now had a butler as well as Burislaf—brought him up before the Captain's high seat.

There the stranger stood, all dripping with brine, which had soaked his thick woollen clothes; and, before Sigvald could ask him what his errand was, called out—

"I bear a message to thee, O Captain."

"You are welcome," said Sigvald. "Can it wait, or must we hear it now?"

"Bad news is ever quickest," said he, "and King Sweyn bade me utter it as soon as ever I saw thee."

"Bad news, and from King Sweyn!" said Astrida. "Has aught happened to the Queen, I wonder?"

"Good or bad, man," said Sigvald, "out with it at once. Good news spoils by keeping, and bad gets worse."

"Perhaps you may think it both bad and good, Earl," said the man.

"Earl!" said Sigvald, "I am no Earl, but only Captain of Jomsburg."

"I say again Earl Sigvald," said the messenger, "for these were King Sweyn's very words."

"Go with all speed to Jomsburg, and greet my brother-in-law, Earl Sigvald, in my name, and tell him that his father, Strut-Harold, Earl in Scania, is dead, and that I have granted him the Earldom after him."

As he said this he turned, and with a loud voice, called out—

"Ye Vikings of Jomsburg, drink to the health of Earl Sigvald, who is now Strut-Harold's lawful heir."

As one man uprose that great company of captains, and, lifting their horns in air, drained them to the toast. "To the health of Earl Sigvald" ran through the hall.

When this homage was over, Sigvald turned to the messenger, and said—

"You were in such haste to speak your business, that I had not time to ask you your name. What may it be?"

"My name," said the messenger, "is Havard, and I am an Icelander, one of King Sweyn's body-guard."

Then Sigvald turned to the butler, and said—

"Lead Havard, the Icelander, to my wardrobe, and take off his wet clothes, and give him new ones; and then bring him back hither that he may eat and drink and be merry."

As the two left the hall, Sigvald said to Astrida—

"This is great news, even if there be no more behind, as I suspect there is. My father, Strut-Harold, was an old man, and has now ended his life happily. What more can any of us desire? I wish, though, that I could have

seen him once more alive, and that I had pushed on to see him but a fortnight since."

"Regrets are vain, Sigvald," said Astrida. "Why bewail what can never be made good? Let us not think so much of the dead as of the living. Do you think Havard has more to tell?"

"An Icelander," said Sigvald, "is not as other men. They blurt out all they have to say at once at the very first burst. But an Icelander tells his news by driblets, and ever keeps the best or the worst last."

"May the best be still to come," said Astrida. "After all, it is no good tidings to hear of a father's death, even though he be old, and in dying makes you an Earl."

So the banquet went on, and Havard soon returned, dressed in the best attire which Sigvald's wardrobe could afford. Before, he could scarcely be seen, for his form was hidden in his drenched sea-clothes. Now he strode into the hall, tall and lissom, and his face was seen to be very fair, save that he had a wild, almost elfish look about the eyes.

"Sit opposite to me, next to Bui the Stout,

Havard, the Icelander," said Sigvald. "Eat and drink, and then tell us any further tidings which you may bring."

After the stranger had despatched his food, and drained a horn, and felt the warmth of the fires which blazed in the centre of the hall, Sigvald rose, and said—

"These tidings that you have brought, Havard, are grave and weighty, most of all to me, to whom this blow falls so near. They might well be enough, and more than enough for one day. But, for all that, something tells me you have more still behind. Speak out, then, if you have aught left to tell."

"A messenger is like a harp," said the Icelander. "There is always music in it, and there is ever something left for him to tell."

"Say on, then," said Sigvald. "Have you aught to add to King Sweyn's message?"

"I have," said Havard; "but you, Earl, and ye Vikings, may think it little worth, you are said to be so proud. King Sweyn did add something to his message. 'Go and tell Earl Sigvald,' he said, 'that I bid him and his captains to come hither, before the first winter

night is past, to drink Strut-Harold's funeral ale.'"

"These be great tidings, indeed," said Sigvald. "But bear you King Sweyn's message aright? Said he not before three winter nights be passed? Did he not fix the feast of heirship within the next three years?"

"He gave me the message as I tell it thee," said Havard, "and I am the more sure of it, that he said he would have no more waiting for this ale of heirship, as when he waited for Palnatoki, when his own father, Harold Bluetooth died."

"It is but short notice," said Sigvald, "to drink my father's funeral ale. There are but sixteen days left between this and the first winter night. How can I go to Denmark, and make ready the feast in that time?"

"For that, too, there is a remedy," said Havard. "King Sweyn has thought of all that. As the lawful heir is out of the land, it falls to the King to prepare the feast in Strut-Harold's hall, and he is now making it ready. Once more he bids thee come to thy

father's funeral ale before the first winter night of this very year, or else—"

"What else can he add?" said Sigvald, fiercely.

"Or else," said the Icelander, with a spiteful look, "be called every man's niddering and dastard, as one who refuses to pay all honour to his own father."

Earl Sigvald—for we may now call him Earl—turned, not like King Sweyn, red, but white, at these words. He restrained himself, however, and said—

"Your words, Havard, are rather those of hate and spite than of friendship and good will. King Sweyn is a mighty man, no doubt, but still there used to be a good rule here in the North, that the man who paid the piper should call the tune. Strut-Harold's property, that is to say mine, will pay the piper; and now I am not allowed to call the tune, or to fix the day I choose for my father's funeral ale. And if I come not by a given day, I am to be called a niddering and a dastard. Men have been before now slain, even for bearing such messages as these."

"I know they have," said Havard, calmly; "and that was why I undertook this errand. As soon as King Sweyn heard Strut-Harold was dead, he said in open hall, 'What man is there here who is bold enough to fare to Jomsburg, and beard Earl Sigvald, the Captain of the Vikings, in his own hall?'"

"And what then?" asked Sigvald.

"Why, as no one offered, and I thought I would like to see your state, and how you took such a message, I came; and here I am."

"Have you a name in Iceland by which men know you besides, Havard?" said Sigvald.

"At home, and for that matter, abroad also," said the Icelander, they call me 'Snake-tongue.'"

"A right good name, and one that fits you thoroughly," said Sigvald. "I am not careful to answer King Sweyn's message to-night. By to-morrow at mid-day my answer shall be ready. Meanwhile, as you have done your errand, and called me dastard and niddering to my face, if I do not dance at King Sweyn's

bidding; and have seen our state, such as it is;—drink your fill of English mead, and enjoy yourself as much as you can in this poor hall. Before to-morrow evening you shall depart in peace, if the weather breaks. If it is still rough, you must remain a prisoner here for a while; for, Vikings though we are, we would not send our worst foe to sea at such a season."

"Thanks, generous Sigvald," said Havard Snake-tongue. "You will make my errand a good one, I know. Never fear this tongue of mine, it shall not sting thee."

"Thanks, again," said Sigvald. "I should never think of wreaking on a mere messenger the insult of his master. King Sweyn, too, has some excuse for his haste and heat; for, as is well known, he parted from Denmark when he last came hither, very much against his own will.

"I have made a song on that," said Havard, "would you like to hear it, Earl Sigvald?"

"What, art thou a skald as well as a bold messenger?" said Sigvald; "and hast thou already made a song on us?"

"I am a skald," said Havard; "and if you must know, that was why they called me 'Snake-tongue' out in Iceland."

"By all means let us hear the song," said Sigvald. "We are always glad to have a skald in our hall."

If there was one thing more than another in which the Northmen delighted, it was in these songs of the Icelandic skalds, confessedly the first of the age, made for the most part as they wandered from court to court of the North in honour of kings, and earls, and great men.

"A song, a song from the Icelander!" ran round the hall, and in an instant the whole band of captains listened in breathless attention to

"THE CATCHING OF KING SWEYN.

"King Sweyn he sat in Heatherby,
Hard by the Baltic shore,
When, leaving Jomsburg on the lee,
Sigvald came sailing o'er;
And thus his messmates heard him sing,
Before the green seas running,
'To catch a king and keep a king
We shall need all our cunning.'

" King Sweyn he sat in Heatherby,
Quaffing the mead so yellow,
When through the door right sturdily,
Strode in a Troll-like fellow.
Out spoke the king, with words that ring,
'Rude fellow, cease thy funning,
To beard a king and brave a king
Thou wilt need all thy cunning.'

" Up spoke the stranger speedily,
'My errand, lord, is hasty,
Nor snapped I at it greedily,
For noisome 'tis and nasty;
Sigvald of Jomsburg lieth sick,
The golden daylight shunning;
Unless you speed to see him quick
Death will have quenched his cunning.'

" 'And where lies Sigvald,' quoth the king.
'Hard by in yonder haven;
Life in him scarcely seemed to cling,
Aloft croaked Odin's raven.'
He said, 'Go, brother, seek the king,
This land with glory sunning,
To him I must reveal a thing
Which will need all my cunning.'

" Up rose the king, he left his hall,
Red wine and mead like amber,
He reached the shore with Thorkell tall,
Up the ship's side they clamber;
Behind him staggered thirty men,
With shouts the welkin stunning,
The king reached Sigvald's ship with ten,
[illegible] lost their cunning.

"There on his bed lay Sigvald bold,
The hand of Death him pressing,
His face so pale, his limbs so cold,
He looked past all confessing.
'Bow down thy forehead, gracious lord,
Fast out life's tide is running,
To catch my voice and mark each word
Thou wilt need all thy cunning.'

"Down bent the king, at his last gasp
Seemed Sigvald wan and weary,—
But when the Knytling felt his grasp,
My! but his heart grew dreary!
With arm of iron and hands that cling
He keeps King Sweyn from running,
And loud he sings, 'to catch a king,
We needed all our cunning.'"

When Havard had finished his song, repeated rounds of applause ran round the hall, followed by a great clapping of hands.

"That song of yours, Havard Snake-tongue," said Astrida, "had but one fault—it was too short."

"May be if Earl Sigvald lives and I live," said Havard, "I may make a better one on him. His doughty deeds are not yet over, something whispers to me."

"It was a right good strain," said Sigvald, "and well delivered. I would rather have thy

tongue with me than against me, Havard, and as a guerdon take this golden ring as a small reward."

As he said this he slipped a golden armlet, which weighed an English pound, off his left arm; and putting it on his sword's point, handed it over to the Icelander across the fire.

As the Icelander took it he said—

"Your bounty, Earl, reminds me of Egil Baldgrim's son at King Athelstane's court. He was a better skald than I shall ever be, and yet you have given me as good a ring."

"There be rings and rings,
And Earls and Kings,"

said Sigvald, breaking out himself into rhyme

"Come, a toast for the Skald
Who sweetly sings."

As he said this, he half drained a horn and handed it over to Havard; who drained it, and holding it upside down said—

"'Tis stinging mead; but we Icelanders can drink as well as sing, and so I thank you for your toast."

Then the Vikings all round the hall drank the toast in honour of the Icelander whose errand had begun so darkly.

"See how things change," said Sigvald to Astrida. "This Icelander came in to mock at us, and we could scarce keep our hands off his throat; and now he is our skald and best friend, and we would keep him here altogether if we could."

"Very true," said the thoughtful Astrida. "So far as the messenger goes he is well enough; but still the message remains behind, and King Sweyn's evil tongue when he turned what might have been a message of joy into one of scorn and insult."

"There is enough work for all the days in the year," said Sigvald, as they left the hall, "and this day's work has been done, and well done. To-morrow will suffice for itself. Meantime let us sleep soundly. All the Vikings of Jomsburg are not yet dead, whatever treachery King Sweyn may meditate."

CHAPTER II.

THE VIKINGS' ANSWER TO KING SWEYN.

THE morrow, as Sigvald had foreseen, was not destined to be an idle day; indeed, the Vikings were never idle, and they were ever occupied with the care of their ships and arms, as no one knew when an evil day might come and they might be called on to use them. This state of readiness was what, in fact, made that free company so formidable. No King in the North or in Western Europe kept up so large a force of sailors and fighting men. It was a standing army, combined for purposes of mutual co-operation and defence. Compared with their numbers, the bodyguards and vassals of the various kings were small and insignificant; and, though each monarch could call out, if he chose, enormous levies all over his dominions, either for war abroad or defence at home, it was after all a tedious operation to

send out the "arrow of war," as it was called, at the sight of which every fighting man of a certain age was bound to follow the sovereign in arms for a given period of time. While the Vikings, therefore, counted their trained warriors and sailors by thousands, the King's bodyguards, which were the germ of a standing army, consisted of hundreds. The Vikings were always ready to strike a blow, but it would have taken King Sweyn in Denmark, or Eric in Sweden, or the great Earl Hacon in Norway, at least a month before he could bring ten thousand men to a given spot.

We may, therefore, understand Earl Sigvald's boast that the Vikings of Jomsburg were not all dead, however much King Sweyn might threaten them. In a few days he could take the sea with three hundred ships at his back, manned, many of them, by one hundred, and none of them with less than fifty men. Even if he left half his force behind him to hold the burg, he could take the sea with one hundred and fifty ships and more than ten thousand men. Against such a force every King in the North would be powerless in case of a sudden

attack; and it was only in sudden attacks that the Vikings appeared as invaders of the Northern and Western coasts. Jomsburg itself, their stronghold, could hardly have been leaguered, and stormed, and sacked by any other than a combined expedition of all the Nórthern nations—a thing impossible in an age when almost every King in the North was at daggers drawn with his neighbours.

Earl Sigvald might, therefore, well feel that he was impregnable except by treachery; and, as it was plain, from King Sweyn's message, that the wrongs he had suffered still rankled at his heart, it was against treachery that his policy was now directed.

As to the thought of not accepting King Sweyn's bidding to Strut-Harold's funeral ale, such a notion was not entertained by the proud Viking for a moment. In this respect King Sweyn was master of the position, for he had said, with perfect truth, that in the event of the absence in a foreign land of the lawful heir, or in a case of minority, it was the duty of the King to call on the heir to take up his father's rights, and to fulfil the duties discharged to the

State by the deceased; for it should never be forgotten that in that age, at least, property, and most of all property in land, had its duties as well as its rights.

Sigvald, therefore, was bound to appear at the feast, and as the King had also the right to fix the time, it would be no excuse to say that it was unusually and unreasonably short. "*Nullum tempus occurit regi*" was a maxim as true in the North then as in England now. King Sweyn chose to take no account of time in this case; and Sigvald, as his vassal in Denmark, had to obey or be called what no free man in that age could bear to be called, a niddering and a dastard, who refused to discharge the sacred duties which he owed to his dead relative.

He must go, then, and go almost at once to Denmark; but how to go, and how many ships to take with him, were the questions which now remained to be settled.

Much of the early dawn of that day was spent in consultation with Astrida, whose good counsel now stood her husband in good stead. However anxious their deliberation may have

been, no trace of trouble clouded the face of either husband or wife when the chiefs and the Icelander met in the hall for their morning meal.

After the usual greetings, Sigvald said to Havard—

"You are in luck, Icelander, in your voyage—luckier far in your departure than in your coming. The sea is smooth, the wind has gone down, and the little there is of it fair for Denmark. Even in that round hull of your trading ship you will not be long in seeing the white cliffs of Moen, and the yellow autumn leaves of the Danish beeches."

"I dare not abuse that round hull," said Havard. "In a long-ship I should have gone to the bottom yesterday, but in my tub I rode out the gale, and what is more, came hither and did my errand, which you have made so good when it might have ended in my death."

"We Vikings," said Sigvald, "are not so bad as we seem. The words of a messenger are the words of him that sends him. As well quarrel with the flask that is filled with gall."

"The sun is still three hours off noon," Sig-

vald went on, turning to another subject. "By midday, as we have said, you shall have your answer. Mean time amuse yourself while we consult our men."

In a little while, as the Icelander was walking along the wharves and admiring the ships, the horns sounded to a muster of men, and the Vikings came trooping out of the gates.

As soon as they were assembled Sigvard mounted the cairn and said—

"It is known, I suppose, to most of you how King Sweyn has sent me a message to say that my father, Strut-Harold, is dead, and that I am his heir and Earl in Scania, and now more than ever in Denmark a liege-man of the King. At the same time, the message was mingled with words of hate, from which it is easy to see, as well as from the short time that King Sweyn has fixed for my father's funeral ale, that he still harbours ill-feeling against us in his heart. Now I wish to make it known to all men that as for me I must go to this funeral ale, as in duty bound both to my father, Strut-Harold, and to King Sweyn. Whatever comes of it, therefore, I will go and must go. It follows,

then, to ask how soon we shall go, and with how many men. All that King Sweyn said in his message was that he asked me and my captains to Strut-Harold's funeral ale before the first winter night was past."

Having said this much, Earl Sigvald stepped down. Then Bui the Stout rose up and said—

"It becomes no man better to speak on this matter after the Captain than me. Though there was long feud between me and mine and Strut-Harold and his sons, all that is past and gone. Sigvald, Harold's son, has no firmer friend alive than Bui, Veseti's son, of Bornholm. Strut-Harold is dead and gone, and Sigvald succeeds him as Earl and as his heir. But this King, who no doubt owes us all a grudge, has sent him a message blended with hate at last, though it begins fairly enough; from which it is plain that he hopes to persuade Sigvald to come to his father's funeral ale, as is his bounden duty, that after it is over he may get him and such of us as are with him into his hands. Now we all know King Sweyn's temper, and indeed he showed it while he was here in Jomsburg, in such a way that he ought

to think himself fortunate at having left this burg at all. His temper will be worse out of duress than in it; and, besides, he owed our founder, Palnatoki, a grudge, and now he owes us all another. How say you, then, Vikings, shall we suffer Sigvald and our noblest captains to go to this funeral ale alone, or shall we follow them thither in such force that King Sweyn, with all his bodyguard at his back, will not dare to lay a finger on Sigvald's head?"

Here Bui the Stout paused, and a murmur of applause ran through the crowd. Then Beorn rose and said—

"I know not if you will hear me, Vikings, when I have but a few days come back from such a disastrous cruize. My excuse is that no man can draw a rope against destiny, and that storm was fated to happen. You all know that I was no friend of Sigvald, when at our last muster he proposed to break the law; but for all that, I am bound to say, he carried through his marriage and carried off King Sweyn in a way which proved him to be a most gallant captain and of a most deep-witted

head. As for this matter of the funeral ale, it reminds me of that ale which I and Palnatoki once drank in King Sweyn's hall, when we had all been cut off by guile and treachery had not Palnatoki foreseen it all and brought us safe out of it. It is enough for a man to have been caught once in his life in a trap, and I am not inclined to put my foot into King Sweyn's trap twice. But, as the Captain must go, let so many of us go with him that if anyone is taken in a trap it may be King Sweyn himself, and none of us."

"Thanks, Beorn; and thanks to you too, Bui the Stout," said Sigvald. "I have made up my mind to go, as King Sweyn bids, but I will take none of you with me on this adventure unless you come of your free will. You obey my commands here not as Earl in Scania, but as Captain in Jomsburg."

Here there was a roar of voices, and a mighty crash of shields and arms, and Thorkell the Tall, taking advantage of the spirit of the Vikings, sprang up on the cairn and called out—

"Speak! who will go with me and Earl

Sigvald to Denmark to drink Strut-Harold's funeral ale?"

Again there was a roar of men and a still mightier crash of arms, and there arose a great chorus of voices, calling out—

"We will all go, we will all go."

"Thanks again to all of you, bold Vikings," said Sigvald; "but you cannot all go. Some must be left at home to guard the fox's earth while the fox himself is out in search of spoil. It will be enough, and more than enough, if one hundred and fifty ships, well manned and fitted, go with me when I set out to drink my father's funeral ale. With you at my back I have little fear of aught that King Sweyn can contrive against me."

"When shall we set out?" said Beorn. "This funeral ale smacks of the good old days, and I long to taste it."

"We will set out as soon as ever we can," said Sigvald. "The winter nights close in apace. King Sweyn sent to fetch us in a hurry, and we will take him at his word. But," he added, in a voice so loud that [illegible]ear, "do not let Havard know

that we mean to seek King Sweyn in such force."

Then the muster of men broke up, and the Vikings streamed back into the burg, where they found Havard busy fitting out his ship.

"Bid him come hither," said Sigvald, "it is not yet high noon, but he shall have his answer!"

There on the wharf, in the open air, the Icelander and the Earl met.

"Have you your answer ready, Earl?" said Havard. "If so, let me hear it and depart."

"It is ready," said Sigvald, "and it is this: Go back and tell King Sweyn to slay the beeves and sheep for the feast, and get together ale and mead of the choicest and strongest for Strut-Harold's funeral ale."

"How soon may he look for you?" said Havard.

"What a silly question for a wise man," answered Sigvald. "How many miles of sea lie between this and Denmark? Where lives the man that can say when we shall reach

the Danish coast? You yourself found it no easy work to come hither yesterday in a single ship; where more than one sail it is still harder to say."

"That reminds me," said Havard, "that King Sweyn bade me ask how many of you he might expect, that he might make the feast ready."

"There," said Sigvald, "spoke rather the son of Æsa the Seamstress than the descendant of Harold Bluetooth and the Knytlings. Go back, I say again, and tell King Sweyn that a king's cheer should never fail, his meat give out, or his mead flow muddy. A king's hall should be big enough and wide enough for every comer, and I am sure there is room in my father's hall for all King Sweyn's body-guard and all these gallant chiefs. Tell King Sweyn that we can neither say when we will come nor how many will come with us; but, if he makes ready the feast as soon as he can, and for as many as the hall will hold, he will not be far wrong."

As this seemed all the answer that he was likely to get, Havard again thanked Sigvald

for his generosity, said farewell, and went down to his ship.

In a few minutes more she had passed through the iron gates, and was steering for Denmark, before a fair and gentle breeze.

As the chiefs watched the Icelander's course from the arch, Beorn said to Vagn, who though sorely battered after his shipwreck, was now able to go about,

"That was a gallant man, that Icelander, to come and thrust his head into a hornet's nest. And what a good song that was he sang in the Captain's praise. So long as the north is inhabited by men that song shall be known and sung in memory of Sigvald and his Vikings."

"Perhaps some one may make a song on me one of these days," said Vagn.

"So they will, so they will, foster-child," said Beorn. "As for that, you might well have one already, after your contest with Sigvald and your bold swimming through the surf in Calmar Sound."

On and on sped the Icelander in his trading ship, which on the homeward voyage had no need to show her seaworthy qualities.

As he ran through the Sound to Zealand, Havard heard that King Sweyn was busy at Strut-Harold's house in Scania, on the opposite coast. Thither, therefore, he went to find the King and deliver his message.

Sweyn was so impatient to hear it that he would not suffer the Icelander to enter the hall. He must utter it there and then.

"Out with it, Icelander, like a man," said the King. "Never pause to think what you have to say. Out with it."

"There is nothing to think of, and little to say," said the Icelander. "I found Earl Sigvald in his hall at supper, with Astrida and the Viking captains, and delivered your message, Lord, down to the last word."

"Did you put in the sting at the end, Snake-tongue?" said the King, "that about the niddering and the dastard."

"I did," said the Icelander.

"And how did he take it?" asked Sweyn.

"His face grew white and then ashy pale," said Havard; "and I saw his hand clutch his sword's hilt, but he treated me as well as you

could have done, O King, and he sent me away with this ring."

"Had a man told me to my face that I were a niddering and a dastard I had slain him on the spot," said Sweyn.

"So did not Sigvald," said the Icelander. "He showed himself gentle and generous in everything."

"A truce to his gentleness and generosity," said the King, "we know well what they both come to; but tell me what answer did he make to my message?"

"He bade me say that he would come to this funeral ale before the first winter night," said the Icelander; "but he would neither name the day nor how many of the chiefs would come with him. He only bade me tell you to make ready good cheer, in meat and ale and mead, for as many as Strut-Harold's hall would hold."

"If he brings no more with him than those," said King Sweyn, "the hour of my revenge draws nigh. I and my men are more than a match for all the men who can be crowded into Strut-Harold's hall yonder."

"I thought this was a question of a funeral ale and not of revenge," said Havard. "Do vengeance and funerals go together?"

"They did at my father's funeral ale, or ought to have gone together," said the King, gloomily. "Perhaps we may be more lucky in this adventure. But you must be weary after your voyage, come into the hall and eat and drink. As for us we must make ready for the feast, as no man can tell when these Vikings may come, like thieves as they are, in the night."

CHAPTER III.

THE VIKINGS MAKE READY.

WHILE Havard Snaketongue was on his way with Sigvald's answer to King Sweyn the Vikings lost not a moment in their preparations for the voyage. Whatever the chiefs might think of it, the men were overjoyed at the prospect of a fresh adventure; and the only difficulty that arose was from the desire of all to accompany Sigvald, though it was out of the question that more than half the force could go.

Such heartburning did this cause, that at last recourse was had to lots; and though those who did not draw the lucky lot still growled and grumbled at their ill-fortune, they could not complain against the chiefs, for had not heaven, that is chance or fate, settled it once for all?

This matter of going or not going was in reality almost all the Vikings had to do. There in the harbour their three hundred ships

always lay fit for sea with stores and arms aboard, for no one knew when they might be summoned to the fight.

In four days, therefore, Sigvald was ready to start with his hundred and fifty ships; of which one-half, seventy-five, were larger, carrying about one hundred men each; and seventy-five smaller, with crews of not more than fifty men. All told, the force mustered about eleven thousand men, a match for any levy which King Sweyn might raise against them in that short space of time.

The day before they started they went out for what we should now call a naval review; and Sigvald, steering his ship which was called the "Bison" or "Urus," led the way out of the port.

After him came Bui in the "Lion," then Beorn in the "Bear," for he called his ship after himself, then Vagn in his new ship the "Raven," then Thorkell the Tall in the "Dragon," then Sigurd, Bui's brother, in the "Sea-Horse;" and after these great chiefs a host of lesser captains, any one of whom would have been famous as a leader in any other band.

As they got a little out from the low sandy coast, the fleet parted into two lines, one led by Sigvald and the other by Bui. When they had sea room enough the horns in each division sounded, and they rowed against each other, in imitation of a naval action. On dashed the ships through the waves, as each man rowed his best, until they were so near to one another that a collision of the whole line seemed inevitable. Then the horns sounded again a different note, and the way of each ship in both lines was stopped by backing the oars.

Again the horns sounded the signal, "Lash ships together in line;" and in a very little space of time each ship was lashed in line, and the two divisions gradually neared each other under the influence of the sea and wind.

But before they could come aboard, the horns sounded again, "Cut your lashings;" and in an instant, as it were by magic, each ship was loose, and one division backing, turned round and fled, as though worsted in the conflict, and made for the harbour, while the other, seemingly victorious, pursued the flying enemy.

All these were operations requiring the

greatest skill and nicety, and liable to miscarry if a single ship fell out of her place and could not measure her distance in the two divisions; but at this review there were neither foulings nor other disasters, and the tactics of the Vikings in naval warfare were all that the most exacting leader could have desired.

After they had returned to port, Beorn said to Vagn:

"It would have gladdened old Palnatoki's heart to have seen how the fleet behaved to-day. How King Sweyn will stare when he sees the Sound filled with our ships when he expects Sigvald to come it may be with twenty."

Next day Sigvald was to sail, and he had intended to leave Astrida behind, but she had no mind to be separated from him so soon.

"My wish is, Sigvald," she said, "that you should take me with you. This is not an expedition for war, but for peace."

"Who can tell how soon it may turn to war?" said Sigvald. "Women are best at home when skulls are split."

"Perhaps if I go," said Astrida, "I may save you some broken crowns. Besides, I have no

mind to sit tamely at home at such a time as this; and, the best reason of all, I wish to see Gunnhilda."

"Were I sure that no bloodshed would arise out of this funeral ale I would say 'Yes' at once, Astrida, for it will go to my heart to leave you so soon; but, with Sweyn's temper, and the wrongs he has had, and this last message, I feel as though I were going out to war, and not to take up my heritage after my father."

"You make peace sure," said Astrida, "when you fare so strong that you may command it. What King in the North can compare with Earl Sigvald of Jomsburg, when he fares to drink his father's funeral ale with one hundred and fifty ships and more than ten thousand men at his back?"

"I might need your counsel, too," said Sigvald, beginning to waver.

"So you might," said Astrida; "and, though you are good in counsel, there is a saw which says, 'Two are better than one.'"

"By all means," said Sigvald, "if one of the two is as good as you are. Beorn and the

old-fashioned folk will grumble, but, for all that, I say 'Come.'"

"And if you say 'Come,'" said Astrida proudly, "what man is there in the company who shall gainsay you. It is settled, therefore, that I shall come."

So it was settled; and though when Beorn heard it, he was as angry as an old Admiral in modern days when the "Gazette" appears, and he declares the service is going to the dogs, and said it was a thing unheard of that a woman should sail in the Viking fleet, and that Palnatoki would never have thought of such a thing; and though some of the old sea-dogs laid heads together, and shook them at the news; still for all that Sigvald and Astrida had their way, and a berth was made up for her and her waiting-women in that very cabin under the poop in the "Bison," where Earl Sigvald had shammed sickness, and where King Sweyn had slept after he was seized and carried off.

The sun, on the morning of their departure, rose clear and bright, and over a smooth sea; and, with a south-east wind, the fleet put to sea from Jomsburg. Though ready for war, the

war-galleys with their painted sides, striped and crimson sails, and gilded vanes and prows and sterns seemed more like a procession of pomp than an expedition bound on any adventure that might befall them.

"Fine feathers make fine birds," again said Beorn to Vagn, as he compared his own business-like, sober-sided ship with some of those of the younger captains. "A good sea fight now would knock off half that ginger-bread yonder. Surely in war an iron prow like this or mine is far better than paint and gilding an inch deep over the wood."

"Don't abuse what you call ginger-bread, foster-father," said Vagn, "for I have a good deal of it both fore and aft in my ship. A man may surely fight as bravely in fine apparel as in work-a-day clothes. It is the strong arm and the stout will that win the day, and not the home-spun garb or the silken kirtle."

"I call it all waste, all this bravery of apparel," said Beorn. "You young men may be finer, but you cannot be bolder and more daring than your fathers."

"We shall settle that before the day is done,

—I mean before we die," said Vagn. "Something tells me that this cruize of ours will not be so peaceful after all."

"What makes you think so, foster-child? Have you seen anything or heard anything? Your grandsire had the gift of second sight, and that we know always runs in a family."

"I have seen something," said Vagn. "As I lay this morning between sleeping and waking, but whether it was a dream I cannot say."

"Your grandsire seldom or never dreamt," said Beorn, "and he said dreams were little worth. At any rate, he was no clear dreamer; but he had the second sight, and saw many things before they came to pass, as he did that happy shot when he slew Harold Bluetooth. But what was it you saw, foster-child?"

"As I lay between sleeping and waking, as I have said, methought we all of us were in a foreign land. It was not in Denmark, and the chief of that land was not King Sweyn."

"You saw the chief, then?" said Beorn.

"I saw him as I see you," said Vagn, "for I stood before him, and you stood before him, too."

"That shows at least that we stood in this dream or vision just as we have ever stood on earth, foster-child, shoulder to shoulder."

"It was not exactly shoulder to shoulder either," said Vagn, "for we were both bound with others of the band in a long rope one behind the other."

"Bound by a rope!" cried Beorn. "Bound by a rope! You and I bound by a rope!" and then he burst out into a loud laugh.

"I saw you bound and myself bound, and many others of the band; and we stood before the chief of that land who sat on a log. He was a swarthy, gloomy-looking man, but very fair withal, and they called him 'Earl,' but what his name was, or of what land he was Earl, I could not tell."

"Saw you aught else, or heard you aught else?" asked Beorn.

"Just then," said Vagn, "just as I stood before the man, I heard the whining of a sword in the air, and I turned and saw a man in the act of striking off my head."

"Striking off your head!" exclaimed Beorn; "and what was I doing when the man was

striking off your head? This is the oddest dream I ever heard. Did I not lift my hand to save you?"

"I have told you that we were all bound," said Vagn, "bound with our hands behind our backs to one long rope. You could not lift hand to save me; but you did save me."

"Right glad I am of that," said Beorn, "and how was it?"

"Just as the stroke was about to fall, you gave me a push with your foot, and threw me forward," said Vagn; "and the sword fell behind me and between us, and cut the rope just above the knot by which my hands were bound; and, as the man missed his stroke, he too fell forward, and the sword flew out of his hand close to where I lay, and I seized it, sprang up and smote off his head."

"That was a sight worth seeing, out of a dream or in a dream. It is all one to me; but saw you anything more?"

"Nothing," said Vagn, "for, after that, the vision, and the land, and the chief on the log, and you and I, and the head as it spun off, and the bleeding trunk, all melted together me-

thought and vanished away; and there I lay in my bed and saw nothing more."

"This was no dream, but second sight," said Beorn. "Some of my own countrymen the Welsh and many of the Scots have it, and it runs in families like leechcraft; and so it is likely as Palnatoki, your grandsire, had the gift that you have it too. But I wish, foster-child, you had seen the whole vision, and could tell us what the end of it all was."

"I have told it you all as I saw it," said Vagn, "and having told it all, there remains naught more to tell."

"No doubt this voyage will not pass over without great tidings," said Beorn. "See now what comes of breaking the law, foster-child. There be many things that a man cannot help or avoid. No man can tell where he will die or how he will die, any more than he can tell where and when he will be born. Over these things, the gods, or fate, or chance rule. But there are things that a man can help. He can help breaking laws which he himself has made or sworn to keep. See what comes of breaking this law of ours—about marriage. The

Captain, no doubt, has borne himself bravely, and won great glory since the law was broken; but only see what has followed, and all the trouble we have had. Here we were, all ready to lay up ourselves and our ships for the winter, after one of the best summers for spoil that the company ever had. There was a prospect of better feasts, and stronger ale and mead than we ever drank in Jomsburg before; and, instead of peace and rest for a while, first came all that riding after women to Burislaf's Grange, and the capture of King Sweyn, and the marriage, and the seeing Sweyn home; and after that came our unlucky voyage with the death of Wolf the Unwashed, and the loss of those good ships and men; and now, last of all, this fleet in which we embark with half our ships and the flower of our band, on a winter voyage of which none can see the end. And all for what? That the Captain might be married and women come into the burg. I say it is a price not worth paying for their company, and that it will be the ruin of the brotherhood."

"You grow old, foster-father," said Vagn, "and your blood does not flow so fiercely as of

yore. There was a time when Beorn, the Welshman, would have been as eager to go on a winter cruise, when the future was all dark and full of adventure, as Vagn Aki's son, or any of the madcaps of the band."

"True, true, foster-child," said the old man, "and yet there is not a man of you that can say his sight is keener or his arm more strong than those of Beorn, the Welshman."

"I said nothing of your sight or strength, foster-father," said the young man. "We all know you are as vigorous as ever. All I said was that you are not so hopeful as of old."

"It may be, boy," said Beorn; "but that is no reason why we two should not cheer ourselves up with a horn of that English mead which we won last year from the monks at Walsingham. How scared they were when we landed at that place in East Anglia, called Wells, and marched up to what they called Our Lady's Shrine, where the old Wishing Wells are. How scared they were, I say, when they saw our Vikings pouring into their church, and when we carried off their gold and silver cups, and made their

thralls drive down their beeves in flocks, and cart down their mead to the seashore."

"I remember it all well," said Vagn, "and I remember, also, that I drank of the water of that well, and made a wish that—"

"And what was it?" said Beorn. "That we might soon come back and pay the monks another visit?"

"Not so," said Vagn sadly. "I wished there that I might soon return to Norway and see Ingibeorg, Thorkell's daughter, once more; and besides, I wished that I might have her to wife."

"Ingibeorg, Thorkell's daughter!" exclaimed Beorn in a rage. "Women, women, again. They will be the ruin of the band. See what comes, too, of drinking water, and holy water, too. Men say, do they not, that whatever men wish for as they drink that water fasting, comes to pass."

"So they say there in East Anglia,' said Vagn, "and I hope it may prove sooth."

"And I do not," said Beorn, doggedly. "What in the world should a boy like you do with a wife. Am I not enough for you? It is bad

enough in the Captain to break the law, but as for you it would be downright sin."

"But Beorn, you forget there is now no law to break. That law has been done away by the will of the company."

"So it has, and more's the pity. But for all that, let us have our mead, boy."

As the two sat over their horn Beorn growled out—

"I wish, though, you had seen that vision out, and could tell what was to become of us both after the man's head spun off."

CHAPTER IV.

THE VIKINGS ARRIVE IN DENMARK.

THAT day the fleet set sail. Away they went, with all the power of their oars, over the waves of the blue Baltic, for the waves of the Baltic are often blue, though oftener still they are yellow. Their course lay, first, for Rugen, as we have said, then through the Sound between that island and the Wendish main, the shore of which they hugged close. Speeding on they sighted Moen, with her white cliffs, the maiden of the Baltic. As the reader knows, Strut-Harold's hall was in Scania, the southernmost province of modern Sweden, and on its western border, so that the Vikings had to run through the Sound between the modern Elsinore and Helsingborg, beyond which town, at some distance west, lay the old Earl's chief grange, where the funeral ale was to be held.

In appearance and arrangement this grange

was not unlike that of King Burislaf, with which the reader is already acquainted. In the centre of a court formed by sleeping rooms, offices, and outhouses, stood a mighty hall, in which four hundred men might feast at once. We may add, that the grange stood on a sand-hill not far from the sea, reminding one in that respect, of the position of Bamborough Castle, in Northumberland, only that this comparison will probably be thrown away, as most readers are as little likely to have seen that famous castle, as to be acquainted with Strut-Harold's grange.

To do King Sweyn justice he had done everything in his power to prepare for the reception of the Vikings, and this he was the more able to do, because, as the judges say, in this case the costs came out of the deceased's estate. It was, in fact, out of the oxen and sheep of Strut-Harold that the beef and mutton for the feast were made, and in the same way out of the huge cellars of the grange were brought the ample stores of ale and mead which were to be, as the publicans say, "consumed on the premises," on the occasion of

the feast. King Sweyn, therefore, could be very generous and hospitable, for he was displaying these royal qualities at the expense of Sigvald, who, even if he inherited large estates, was sure to find his cellars empty, and his flocks and herds reduced to nothing.

After several days' work, at which all his body-guard and thralls assisted, everything seemed ready.

"They may come, if they will to-day, this very day," said King Sweyn as he rose up on that fine morning of October 20th.

"They have six days still," said Havard Snaketongue, "but if they do not come in a day or two all the fresh meat will be spoiled."

"Then, more must be slaughtered," said Sweyn. "It will be all the worse for Sigvald, and for the teeth of the band, for they will find the meat tough and not tender."

"Earl Sigvald will find much tough to chew on this voyage, no doubt," said the Icelander.

"He shall, if I have my will," said the King. "I have not forgotten how hard it was, not only to swallow but to digest much that was

offered to me in Jomsburg and in Burislaf's grange."

"I thought bygones were to be bygones," said the Icelander.

"So they shall be," said King Sweyn. "Earl Sigvald comes hither in my peace, and in peace he shall depart, so far as we are concerned; but it does not follow from that that he should altogether escape scot free for his overbearing behaviour to his liege-lord."

"I am glad to think he will depart in peace," said the Icelander significantly, "and all the more so because I believe he may come, indeed, in peace, but ready for war."

"Why say you that?" said King Sweyn sharply.

"Because there was a rumour on board my ship, though I did not know it as a truth myself, that the Vikings had made up their minds to come to this funeral ale with half their force. That would make a right royal feast, King Sweyn."

"With half their force," cried King Sweyn, "why that would be about one hundred and fifty ships, and more than 10,000 men."

"Say twelve," said the Icelander, "for I saw their ships, and many of them would carry one hundred men each."

"Why did I not know this before?" said King Sweyn, "too long has this been hidden from me."

"I did not tell it," said Havard, "because it was not certain. Sigvald said nothing of the kind. He only said he could neither tell when he would come, nor how many of his men would come with him. Besides, as the saying runs, 'the more the merrier.' It will be a grand sight to behold the Sound filled with gallant ships, and to see ten thousand Vikings marching up to the grange."

"We shall be eaten out of house and home," said the King, "Sigvald can never expect me to feed all his followers."

"As he is on his own land," said the Icelander drily, "he will look to feed them himself. It is his own doing if he brings a force with him to waste his own goods."

"Very true," said the King, "but for all that we must not be taken unawares;" and with that, leaving the Icelander to his reflec-

tions, he ran off to order a thousand more sheep and oxen to be slaughtered if they could be brought to the spot.

He was only just in time; for, a little after noon, a warder on the hill, which commanded a view right down the Sound, called out—

"I see ship after ship sailing in the offing."

King Sweyn was soon at his side as he scanned the channel, which, at that distance, seemed no broader than an inland river. He saw it seemingly choked with ships, which followed each other in quick succession.

"They are too far off to count yet," said the warder, "but there must be more than a hundred of them."

After gazing at them awhile, King Sweyn descended the hill and bade all his body-guard get ready their arms. At the same time he sent out to raise the levies on the opposite shores of Zealand and in Fünen, for it was of little use to call out Strut-Harold's men to fight if need were against Strut-Harold's heir.

In his preparations, he had expected Sigvald perhaps with his chief captains and twenty

ships manned each with one hundred men. That, making about two thousand in all, would have been a large gathering for any funeral ale save that of a King. At his own father's funeral ale we know that Sweyn sat with one hundred men on his side of the hall, and Palnatoki over against him with another hundred. At this feast he had brought with him two hundred men of his body-guard and vassals, and had left room for Sigvald and as many opposite to him. He was able to do this, for Strut-Harold had been a mighty man, fond of pomp and show, and had built him a hall which could hold more men than any that the King possessed. As for the rest of Sigvald's followers they could be entertained in the farms and granges round. For all these he was prepared, but the prospect of one hundred and fifty ships and at least ten thousand men was beyond all measure, and threw all his calculations into confusion.

All that afternoon the fleet of the Vikings drew nearer and nearer until at last they were gathered in a half-moon at the mouth of the bay, close to which the grange stood.

While the King and his men gazed at this

magnificent sight, a boat pushed off from Sigvald's ship, "the Bison," which bore his banner at her mast-head, and rowed for the shore.

"Go some of you, and you Icelander, down to the shore," said Sweyn, "and ask them whence they come and what they want."

As the keel of the boat grated on the pebbles of the beach, Havard Snake-tongue called out—

"Who are ye, and whence do ye hail?"

"Vikings of Jomsburg, come to seek King Sweyn," was the answer, "Is the King here?"

"He is," said the Icelander.

"Tell him," said the speaker in the boat, "that Earl Sigvald greets him and begs leave to land with his men that he may hold Strut-Harold's funeral ale."

With this message Havard slowly retraced his steps to the King and delivered it.

"Go and tell the messenger that Earl Sigvald is welcome to land with his captains as soon as he will; but, for his men, if he wishes them to land with him, the King begs that they may not land till to-morrow."

With this answer the boat rowed back to the ships by this time moored in the Sound,

and soon pushed off from "the Bison's" side again.

As she neared the shore, the King said "Yon boat has on board of her that man who is easy to ken half a mile off. He is no other than Thorkell the Tall, Earl Sigvald's brother. I will go down to the beach and speak to him myself."

As the boat touched the beach, King Sweyn reached the shore and hailed Thorkell by name.

"What tidings, Thorkell the Tall? Come ye out to conquer a kingdom, or to keep a funeral ale?"

"We come to keep our father's funeral ale, lord," said Thorkell, "but for all that we have thought it right to come so strong that it would be worth none of our enemies' while to break the peace."

"Well spoken, Thorkell," said the King. "To-morrow then at night we will hold Strut-Harold's funeral ale. Meantime, will Sigvald land with his captains, or wait till to-morrow and land with his men?"

"Earl Sigvald bids me say, lord, that he will not land without his men. Half the whole

force of us Vikings have come hither to do honour to us and to our father and to you, lord, in keeping this feast better than any feast has yet been kept in the North. He will not land, therefore, without those who have come so far to do honour both to him and you."

"'Tis well, Thorkell," said the King, "bear back my greeting to Earl Sigvald, and thank him for the honour that he does us. To-morrow, at high-noon, we expect him to land with his goodly company. In the meantime we will make what preparations we can to receive them all."

All that night King Sweyn's body-guard and thralls worked hard to raise booths and sheds and to turn barns and lofts into rooms, in which a portion, at least, of the unwelcome guests might be stowed away. The rest, taking with them meat and mead and ale, must after the solemn landing, return to their ships and there drink Strut-Harold's funeral ale. Never before had Northern King, no, not even Burislaf when the Vikings ate him out of house and home, been so put to it for supplies. This, itself, was an indignity and a disgrace, for the royal resources not to

hold out when called on. Nothing of the kind had ever before happened in Denmark, and it may be imagined that King Sweyn was not a little out of temper to find that when he thought to humiliate Sigvald at this feast, the wily Earl had not only accepted the invitation which he had been warned not to neglect under pain of being considered a dastard, but had contrived to turn the tables on the King, and to mortify his pride even on the very threshold.

All that night, the King and his men toiled, while Sigvald and his men lay quietly on board their ships keeping up an effectual blockade of the bay.

We had quite forgotten to say that Queen Gunnhilda was all this time with her husband. King Sweyn had behaved to her as well as his surly temper allowed him to behave to any woman, but she had rather a bad time of it.

When the King was utterly tired out, he went to bed and lay down by the Queen's side; but he was too weary to rest, and lay there tossing about.

At last the Queen said to him in a soft sweet voice, "I fear me you are vexed, lord, and that the

feast is not likely to turn out to your mind?"

"What a silly question," said Sweyn. "You might see that, one would think, without asking."

"But tell me what vexes you," said Gunnhilda laying her hand softly on his shoulder, only, we grieve to say, to have it shaken off at once.

"If you must know," said Sweyn, "it cuts me to the heart to think that when I had planned a little revenge to humiliate Sigvald, if he had come with the company which I supposed, my schemes are blown to the winds by the sails of this fleet which lies yonder at the mouth of the bay. Who ever heard of coming to a funeral ale with ten thousand men?"

"Earl Sigvald, my brother-in-law and yours, is a mighty man and a proud man and a clever man," said Gunnhilda, "and he has taken you unawares; but one scheme is not every scheme, and a fox has many holes to his earth. Think again; but first tell me what indignity you meant to offer him."

"I thought," said the King, "just as the funeral ale was at its height, I would have

seized the doors of the hall outside, and not suffered Sigvald and his men to leave it until they had offered ample atonement for the indignity they had done me; and, if they did not make it, I would have burnt the hall over their heads."

"That," said the Queen, "would have been called an unkingly deed, to threaten to burn men alive at a funeral ale; and more than all when you had invited them, and they had come, in your peace."

"I did not say I would have burnt them," said Sweyn, "I only meant to frighten them."

"It will take more to frighten Earl Sigvald than that," said the Queen, "or my sister Astrida either, if she is with him. How, too, would you have got them all into the hall without you and your men; and if you were inside do you think the sword of Sigvald or the axe of Thorkell the Tall would have been idle when the doors were seized? No! you should have thought of something better."

"You spoke of Astrida," said the King, "I should have married her as I wished, and then she would have given me good counsel."

"You could not have married Astrida," said

the Queen meekly, "for her heart was set on Sigvald before ever she saw you; but there are others than Astrida who can give you good counsel. It is a way we Wendish women have: will you hear mine?"

"I am ready to hear it," said Sweyn, "but you are not Astrida, and it will come to no good."

"You will not catch Sigvald and ruin him at this feast," said Gunnhilda, "but you may plan his ruin at it, and so rid the North and yourself of this thorn in all your sides, these Vikings of Jomsburg. Tell me now, what man do you hate, and all Danes hate most, in the world?"

The King thought for a moment and then said—

"Not Sigvald, but Earl Hacon of Norway; but what has he to do with Sigvald?"

"Much," said Gunnhilda. "Here are these Vikings, full of pride and valour, thinking no power in the North their match. Can you not so contrive it at this feast that they shall run their heads against Earl Hacon, the man you most hate; and then whatever harm happens to either of them it will be equally to your gain?

for I know you hate Sigvald and the Jomsburgs only a little less than you hate Earl Hacon."

"You are a jewel of a wife," said King Sweyn, turning to her. "But tell me, why do you plot against Sigvald and take counsel for me who have treated you so coldly, but as I never will again?"

"For many reasons," said Gunnhilda; "first of all because I love you, though you would never see it till now. Next, because I cannot forgive Sigvald for not taking me. That is a slight a woman never forgets. Also, perhaps, a little to spite Astrida because she is so happy and thinks herself so wise, and because she is so beautiful, and because they called me stupid compared to her. Are these reasons enough, or will you have any more?"

"I have heard more than enough, and the first would be quite sufficient," said King Sweyn.

And so that royal pair passed the rest of the night more happily than it begun, and from that night forth were the best friends in the world.

CHAPTER V.

THE LANDING OF THE VIKINGS.

It was a grand sight next morning to see those one hundred and fifty ships unmoor and approach nearer to the shore. On they came in all their bravery of gilded prows, vanes, and painted sides, their crimson or parti-coloured canvas bellying in the wind, their oars flashing through the water, while over all arose a great roar from those rapid strokes, and a deep hum from the voices of so many men.

As there were no wharves or jetties on the shore, the large ships could not lie close to the beach, and after anchoring again where there was just water enough to float their ships in safety, Earl Sigvald and his followers prepared to land in their boats. This was naturally rather a tedious business, however short the distance from the shore. At no time is it very easy to land from eight to ten thousand men; but, in this case, as each ship carried with her a boat

which could hold about fifteen men, the landing was effected in less time than might be thought possible.

While this operation was in progress, neither King Sweyn nor his men even so much as showed themselves, much less came down to the beach. No doubt the King watched the Vikings with anxious eyes, and admired the dexterity and order with which they landed in their boats; but, until Earl Sigvald stood at the head of his host, which ranged in ranks many men deep all along the circuit of the bay, their centre being just opposite to his father's hall, King Sweyn made no sign. Then when all was ready on the part of the Vikings, their horns sounded for the march, and they slowly ascended from the shore. As soon as that blast was heard, another rang out from the hill on which Strut-Harold's grange stood, and King Sweyn, with his banner in air and surrounded by his body-guard, was descried crowning the eminence.

After the Vikings had marched about half the way—the grange might have lain about a mile from the shore—Earl Sigvald halted his

men; and, while they stood at ease, went on with the chief captains of the host to meet the King. Let us observe here that neither the Queen was with her husband, nor Astrida with the Earl; the one from the grange and the other from the Bison looked on with keen eyes on all that passed.

King Sweyn waited till the Viking Captain was close to him, then in solemn state, clad in his bravest apparel, and wearing his crown round his iron head-piece, he slowly moved forward a few paces, until the two bands came within speaking distance. Then the King said in a loud voice—

"Welcome Earl Sigvald, Harold's son; thou art come to keep thy father's funeral ale, and to do homage to us for his earldom, which we have granted thee."

"I have come, lord," answered Sigvald, "both to do honour to my father and to you, in keeping this funeral ale which you have prepared; and as for the earldom, I am ready to accept it, and to do homage for it by kissing your hand in the hall to-night."

"'Tis well, Earl," said King Sweyn, "we

will receive thy homage to-night, when we all drink Strut-Harold's funeral ale. Meantime, as you have long since had your morning meal, let me see you review your gallant company on the broad links that stretch round the shores of the bay. Truth to say, we had not looked for you in such numbers; but, now that you are here, every one must confess that he never set eyes on brisker and more dashing men."

"In this, as in all things, lord, we are ready to do your pleasure. For our numbers, you know it is our custom to take the sea in full force. As our hand has been against every man in his time, so the time may come when every man's hand may be against us. 'Fore-warned fore-armed,' is a good old saw, and you seemed so pressing, lord, in your message, that we thought it best, though we came in peace, to be prepared for war."

"No doubt your reasons were good," said King Sweyn, "and now let us behold your review. You Vikings have had so many real battles, that it will be little trouble to you to rejoice our eyes and those of our Queen with a mock-fight."

"We will hold it at once, lord," said Earl Sigvald, as he returned to his men with his captains, who then marched in a body towards the sandy links which lined the shore, while King Sweyn, now joined by Gunnhilda, surveyed the scene from the vantage ground of the hill.

Though the Vikings marched off in a body, the ground trembling under their steady tramp, they had not reached the links before they had split into two great bodies, who then marched in opposite directions to either side of the deep bay. So rapidly, and yet with such order, was this separation effected, that it was done as though by magic. At one moment they were but one body, at the next, two; over one Earl Sigvald took the command, over the other Bui the Stout. As soon as they had taken up their positions on either side of the bay, each body, say of from four to five thousand men, faced about and marched rapidly towards the bight of the bay. It so happened that, just at the very bight, the ground was rough and rugged, with huge stones and dykes, which encircled an ancient barrow, which could have told

stories centuries old if it had a tongue to tell them. This barrow might be called the key of the position, and consequently was the object of the friendly contention of the Vikings. As soon as they turned and began to approach each other again, it was evident that this barrow and its surrounding impediments must be the apple of that mock strife, and the first question which arose was, which band would first occupy it, and the next, whether, when so occupied, it would be able to hold the cairn against their antagonists.

As Sweyn and his Queen and his body-guard looked down on the advancing hosts, their excitement grew intense. "How they both march," cried Sweyn. "See, Gunnhilda, what long strides they take, and yet how evenly they keep their ranks." Then, as each host neared the barrow, he cried out, "I bet on Bui the Stout; see he has all but reached the first dyke, while Sigvald lags behind a little. Ha! the first man takes the dyke on that side, and down he falls, hurled back like a stone from a sling, and what are those that crown it from the inside? I see now, a band of Sigvald's

men, whom he has detached to hold the dyke against Bui, while the rest gain the hill. That was a clever stratagem, and worthy of the Earl. No! I will not bet on Bui, I will bet on Sigvald."

So the King went on in great delight, while Bui's men, rushing on in numbers, overbore the defenders of the dyke, and streamed into the rough ground, and the rocks below the barrow. But, in the meantime, Sigvald's device had gained him the time he needed, and the barrow was seen crowned with hundreds of his men.

"Well done, Earl," shouted Sweyn, though Sigvald could not hear a word he said. "Well done; you have won the barrow, and now let us see whether you will be able to hold it."

Of course in this mock-battle no weapons were used; if swords were brandished no sword-strokes fell. Axes gleamed aloft, but no foeman bit the dust before their bitter edge. No spears hurtled through the air; no arrows were launched. But for all that the struggle was long and obstinate, for at the dyke, where Bui's men received their check, the men grappled with each other, and wrestled and hurled

one another down; and still more in the attempt to scale the barrow and expel Sigvald's men, the combatants felled one another rudely to the earth, or rolled down the steep sides, locked in a grip which might well crack weak ribs.

At this hand-to-hand tussle, Sweyn got still more excited and delighted.

"Well done, Sigvald; well done, Bui," he called out by turns, as victory seemed to incline to either side.

"Down all Bui's men roll again, down to the very rocks in the plain. That was a gallant bout to win the hill, and yet it failed."

Then in a little while, "See, Bui himself now leads on his men, and already they are half way up. Well done, Bui! And now Sigvald rushes to the rescue, and Bui is about to grip him and conquer, or drag him down in his embrace to the plain. But see, before they can close, Vagn rushes in between them, and he and Bui wrestle on the crest of the cairn. Now Bui! Now Vagn! Ha! Vagn falls on one knee, and Bui wins!"

But this was only one of those tricks in

wrestling of which Vagn had availed himself; as he fell, and so slipped from Bui's grasp of iron, he seized his stout antagonist by the waist, and hurled him over his head down the slope of the cairn.

"Well done, Vagn," roared the King. "That I call wrestling, indeed."

As he said this, Bui rolled over and over down the steep side of the barrow, to be picked up by his men, who, after this defeat of their leader, made no further efforts to take the barrow, on which the victorious Sigvald remained with Vagn, Beorn, and the other chiefs of his band.

"A fair field," said Sweyn to Gunnhilda, "and well fought. As we thought, the day remains with Sigvald, who, as is his wont, has won it by stratagem rather than brute force. Had he not gained time by sending those fellows to stop Bui at the dyke, the stout son of Veseti would have carried the cairn by a dash."

"I daresay," said Gunnhilda. "But see! Astrida lands in a boat, and steps on shore. Let us go down to meet her."

"With all my heart," said Sweyn; "the more so," he added, with a fond look at his wife, "that I no longer think her either so fair or so wise as thou art."

On the shore the sisters met, and at the very first glance Astrida saw, by that magnetic telegraph, the face, that all now went well between King Sweyn and Gunnhilda. The King was kind and attentive to her, and she looked on him with loving eyes. There was no need to ask the Queen whether she were happy, for she showed it on her face.

After they had kissed each other—the way of women, just as much in those days as in ours—Gunnhilda said—

"So you have come with the Earl, Astrida? how glad I am to see you, and what a great company follows you! This fleet quite surpasses that squadron with which the Vikings escorted us home!"

"We come, sister," said Astrida, "to do honour both to you, and to the King, and to ourselves. In after days, perhaps, it will be said that no funeral ale in the North was like that which King Sweyn, Harold's son, kept with

the Vikings of Jomsburg in Strut-Harold's hall."

"That may well be," said Gunnhilda. "Who ever heard of a fleet of one hundred and fifty ships, and ten thousand men coming to a funeral ale?"

"It is well," Astrida replied, "that the world should sometimes hear new things. This is a new thing, but it is a grand and proud thing, at least for me, to set out with my husband to drink his father's funeral ale with a whole fleet and a great army at our backs. But see! here comes Sigvald, and here comes Bui also. Let us greet them."

The two captains of the Vikings now approached what we may call the royal group on the shore. If any one is alarmed lest Bui should have been hurt by his roll down the barrow after the heavy fall which Vagn threw him, we hasten to relieve his mind by saying that Veseti's son was cast in too tough a mould to take much harm by what he looked on as mere child's play. His garments were dusty and torn, and he bore some scratches on his face, but for the rest he seemed as stout and lively

as ever, and only laughed when the King said—

"That was a brave bout, Bui the Stout, that you had on the barrow with Vagn, Aki's son. How deftly the lad dropped down, made you loose your grip, and then rising as he caught you by the waist, tossed you over his head."

"That was a fair fall, lord," said Bui, "and only shows one should never be what we call cock-sure of anything. I thought I had him fast, and that I was going to give him a cross-buttock; but for all that he had me safe. Bairns will ever be bairns, and they have more dash than older men. Vagn, Aki's son, has the spirits of a boy, and the sinews of a man."

"True," said the King, and then his face clouded as he added, "Your words are like those which my foster-father Palnakoti used to say of me when I was a lad."

Gunnhilda had been long enough with Sweyn to know that when he began to talk or think of Palnatoki his good temper began to fail.

"Astrida must see the grange, lord, and the

room where I mean that she and Sigvald shall sleep to-night after the feast. Shall we not climb the hill, and regain the house?"

"I am quite ready, lady," said King Sweyn, as he led the way, the Queen and Astrida on either hand of him, while Sigvald and Bui and Beorn and Vagn, and one or two of the other captains who had joined them, followed behind, with some of the King's body-guard.

Arrived at the grange, we leave the King and the men to themselves. The King and his body-guard had still much to look after in their preparations for this mighty feast. As for the banquet in the hall itself, that we know had long been prepared; what remained to be done was rather to provide for the thousands of mouths which had been added. All that day long lines of thralls had been passing up and down between the grange and the shore, carrying carcases of oxen and sheep and casks of ale and mead to the ships, where, as we have seen, the great body of the Vikings were to be entertained. At the same time, the leaders of lesser note were spread over the houses of the great farmers on the Earl's estates; and so,

with infinite trouble, before nightfall there was not a man of that vast company who had not found his allotted place, and King Sweyn could boast that he had provided such a funeral ale as the North, with all its hospitality, had never known.

While the King and his men were thus "cumbered with much serving," what was the employment of Earl Sigvald and his brother? It is soon told; they both sought the spot where Strut-Harold's cairn stood. There, in a clearing in the pine forest at the back of the grange, on a knoll, was heaped up the barrow of the old Earl. It was well made, rising knoll and all sixty feet from the ground, and two hundred in circumference. It was green too, for Strut-Harold's men had covered it with fresh sods. There the brothers passed some time stretched on the ground, thinking of the old man whom they should never more behold.

Astrida and Gunnhilda were in the ladies' bower. Very soon after they had entered it the elder said to the younger:—

"It is easy to see that you are happy, Gunn-

hilda, and that your fears as to the King's behaviour were groundless. Tell me, how long has this change happened?"

"Oh, ever so long. I am sure I can't tell how long; but ever so long. King Sweyn is the best husband in the world."

"How happy I am to hear it," said Astrida, "but I am sure he can never be a better husband than Sigvald."

CHAPTER VI.

THE FUNERAL ALE.

And now the hour for the feast came. Our readers are already acquainted with the arrangements of the hall. When Sigvald and his captains and chief men, two hundred in all, came up from their ships in their bravest apparel, they found it a blaze of light. Never, even in Burislaf's Grange, had so many wax tapers been seen; in no hall had the fires ever seemed to burn so brightly. There with a cluster of taper-bearers behind him sate King Sweyn in his high seat, on the right side, in his royal robes, and with Gunnhilda on his right hand. On that side were seated two hundred of his body-guard; while the whole left side of the hall was set apart for the Viking captains. As Sigvald, preceded by a blast of horns, led in Astrida, and sat down in the high seat opposite to the King with his wife by his side, a

murmur of admiration ran round the hall at the sight of such a noble pair.

Some of our readers may ask why Earl Sigvald did not take his father's high-seat, as this was Strut-Harold's funeral ale? but in truth, that was just the reason why he did not take it. No freeman in the North was allowed to fill his father's seat till after he had drunk his funeral ale; and even if King Sweyn had not been present in person, Sigvald would have sat where he now sat opposite to, but not in, his father's seat.

As the Earl and the Captains passed up the hall, they made a bow towards the King, but never a word passed between them.

Then in came a great band of thralls with the tables, which were speedily covered with all the dainties which the rude cookery of the age could command. Plain roast and boiled, and much more boiled than roast, was the rule in the tenth century. There were no made dishes, few vegetables but kail, and after an ample supply of joints and game, to which we may add geese, some kickshaws, as we have already said, ended the repast. During the banquet,

ale and mead, and perhaps on this occasion French wines, were served; but gastronomically viewed, the whole feast was as unsatisfactory as a dinner at an American hotel now-a-days, and men bolted their food and disposed of it with marvellous rapidity.

And now we will suppose the eating over and the boards cleared away. When the thralls had ended that work the real business of the evening began.

Then King Sweyn rose, and spoke as follows:—

"It is known to all men how we are all met here in peace and good faith to drink the funeral ale of Strut-Harold, the good Earl of Scania. That is an old custom which will last so long as the North lasts, and we mean to drink it deep and merrily, as such an ale ought to be drunk. But before we come to that, we have another bit of business to do, and we may as well take that first. You all know that Strut-Harold was Earl of this land, a title which he had long before my time, for it was granted him by my father, Harold Bluetooth. Now you all also know that an

Earldom is not a title that descends from father to son. Sometimes, as in this case, it is a good thing to keep a good title in a good stock, but if the stock be bad the title should perish; for what is worse for a land than to have over it an Earl who is neither good in arms or counsel? Strut-Harold in his youth had been a gallant warrior, and in his old age he was wise and prudent; his son Sigvald is both brave and wise, after the pattern of his sire. We have therefore resolved to make him Earl of this land after Strut-Harold, and that thus he shall become a vassal of our realm."

After this pretty speech the usual murmur of applause followed; when it died away, the King went on—

"How say you, Sigvald, Harold's son, wilt thou be our liegeman and true vassal here in Scania?"

"I will," said Sigvald in a loud voice, "but on one condition."

"A King," said Sweyn, haughtily, "brooks no conditions, when he bestows his bounty. But, as we value your faithful service, we are ready to hear them."

"I am ready to be Earl in Scania," said Sigvald, "and I thank thee, lord, for doing me such honour; but for a while at least I must remain Captain of Jomsburg."

"Here at least in this place, on the soil of my own realm," said Sweyn, "I know naught of Jomsburg. When I make thee my Earl in Scania, I am willing to forget that such a burg as your stronghold on Wendish soil exists, and many will say that I am generous to forget it after what has passed. I say again, Sigvald, Harold's son, wilt thou be my faithful Earl in Scania?"

"You are willing to forget Jomsburg, lord," said Sigvald, "but I, with all my captains listening to me, and with my men in thousands, and my ships in hundreds in the bay, cannot forget the burg. All my duty and all my time, my goods and my life, are pledged to the gallant company which I command. I answer thee, that I will be your faithful Earl while I am in Scania, but that the most of my life must still be spent in Jomsburg."

"It is a good old saying," said the King, "that if a man may not have the whole, he

must be content with the half, or less than the half. In this case, I am willing to allow you to be Earl in Scania, and to live in your burg; for I feel sure that even at that distance the terror of your name will keep the land in peace. Besides, some of us know that it is not so hard to reach Jomsburg from Denmark, and after all, not so hard to return. It is no far cry from Jomsburg to this grange, and so I waive this difficulty also, and am ready to accept your condition."

No murmur, but a roar of applause rang through the hall as the King uttered these gracious words.

"Thanks, lord," said Sigvald; "though I may feel, as the Ersemen say, like a bird in two places at once, when Captain of Jomsburg and Earl in Scania, I am willing to become your liegeman; and, after all, may-be this double life may last but for a while, for though Palnatoki was Captain of Jomsburg when he was old and stricken in years, that was an exception, and the man who will be a Captain of Jomsburg must be both young and strong."

"Yes, yes! I see," said Sweyn, with a sullen

smile, "after all, your rule in Jomsburg depends on Fate, and may last only for a while."

Then resuming his frank cheerful look, he called out, "bring me the wand, marshal."

Then the marshal stepped before the King, and said:—

"Behold the wand, lord."

The King took the wand, and called out:—

"Now, Sigvald, Harold's son, come forward, and take this wand in token that I have made thee my Earl in Scania."

The Viking Captain rose and strode across the hall; as he approached the King, Sweyn held out the wand, and Sigvald took it, bowed, and returned to his seat; but it was not for long. The King rose at once and said:—

"But one thing now remains, Earl Sigvald. Come before me, and kiss my hand and do homage for thine earldom."

Up rose Earl Sigvald, and crossed the hall again, and said:—

"I come, lord, to kiss thine hand, and do homage for the earldom which thou hast given me."

Then the King reached out his hand, and

Sigvald took it, and raised it to his lips. At the same moment the horns sounded through the hall, and the whole company, rising, called out, "Hail, King Sweyn! Hail, Earl Sigvald! Now is Sigvald, Harold's son, King Sweyn's lawful Earl in Scania."

When this ceremony was over, Sweyn threw himself back in his high seat, and turned to Gunnhilda and said—

"There be many who would hew off the hand which they are bound to kiss. I wonder if it will be so in this case."

"I think, lord," said Gunnhilda, "Earl Sigvald owes you no ill-will, though, as is natural, you may well feel a grudge against him. He will be a faithful Earl."

"Tell me, Gunnhilda," asked the King, "have I played my part well? Have I followed the advice you gave me this morning? Were not my words generous and gracious, and have I not so borne me in this matter of the homage that I may hope before the night be out to lead the Vikings on to their destruction, and so have my revenge."

"You have played your part well, lord;

perhaps too well, for I could see by Astrida's face that she was perplexed to imagine what could have thus changed your mood towards Sigvald. Take my word for it, she is now racking her brain to discover the cause of your sudden good will."

Shaking off thoughts of revenge for the time, King Sweyn now called to his butler.

"All this homage-making and taking has been dry work. Fill up the horns, and let every man drink a mighty draught of mead in honour of Earl Sigvald, Harold's son, my liegeman here in Scania."

The mead was brought, the horns filled, and again the whole company, standing up, pledged Sigvald, now fully confirmed in his dignity of Earl, on terms which he had dictated himself. That alone, in the eyes of his Captains, was another triumph of his policy; and as he turned his horn upside down to show that not a drop was left undrunk, Beorn the Welshman said to Vagn—

"The Captain wins the day in everything; and then how gracious our surly Sweyn is. trust we be not all 'fey,' and that your

second sight may not speedily come to pass."

"There is something still behind," said Vagn. "See, the King whispers to Havard Snake-tongue, the Icelander."

But it was only their suspicions which made them watch the dealings of the King with the Icelander. All that the King asked him was a very simple question: when he had ever heard of such a gathering in the North to any funeral ale—thinking, no doubt, to make the Icelander confess that the present concourse of guests was unmatched. But in this King Sweyn was mistaken, for Havard drily said,—

"We had once a funeral ale in Iceland that could not only match this, but beat it."

"Where, and when?" asked King Sweyn.

"Up in Hjaltadale, in the North country," said Havard; "and this was how it was, lord. Hjalti, the son of Thord Scalp, came out to colonise Iceland, and took a dale and called it Hjaltadale, after himself. He was a famous man in Norway, and his sons, Thorwald and Thord, were famous men after him. When

their father died, and they drank his funeral ale, they sent and asked all the chiefs in Iceland to come to it; but they took more time about it than you, lord, and besides, they paid for it out of their own money. It was lucky they took time, for when they counted heads they found that the guests numbered more than twelve hundred. So they built them a hall to hold them all, and when the feast was over—and right royal it was—every guest was sent home with gifts."

"That was a grand feast," said the King; "but we have ten thousand in all to feed."

"True, lord," said Havard Snake-tongue, "but, as I said before, not with your own money; and then think of twelve hundred in a hall, while here we have only a poor four hundred."

"A poor four hundred do you call it?" cried the King. "These poor four hundred could both buy out and fight out all your twelve hundred peasants."

"May-be, lord," said Havard; "and yet your father, Harold Bluetooth, was a mighty King, but he thought twice before sending his long-

ships to conquer Iceland, and when he had thought twice he gave up the plan and thought no more of it."

"Very true," said Sweyn; "but then the gods were against him and the spirits that watch over Iceland."

"So the priests told him, I know," said Havard; "but it is not the ancient gods nor the Christian God that kept him off. If you must know, lord, it was the spirit of these peasants as you call them. So long as that spirit lasts no foreign King can hope to conquer Iceland, either with his ships or with his vassals. Why these very sons of Hjalti, the next year after they had drunk their father's funeral ale, rode with their men to the Althing in gay garments, and when they came upon the plain beyond the Great Rift, all men thought the blessed gods, the Æsir, had come down to visit earth, their apparel was so splendid and their arms so bright."

"All very true, I dare say," said Sweyn; "but it was a long time ago, and I will never believe that there has been any funeral ale like this."

Then he called to his butler, and bade him send the mead round fast and freely.

"We have still Strut-Harold's funeral ale to drink, and many cups of mead to drain ere bed-time comes."

CHAPTER VII.

THE FUNERAL ALE AND THE VOWS.

AFTER the mead had passed round freely, and when men at last began to wonder when the funeral ale would ever come, King Sweyn, whose purpose was to moisten the clay of the Vikings well with drink before he brought forward his plan, rose and said—

"We have now, I think, done honour enough to Earl Sigvald in his new dignity. No man here can say that his entry into his earldom has been a dry one, and this is why I have let the horns pass round and the real business of the night flag, because I would not that any man should say that Earl Sigvald, my old friend and new liegeman, was hurried into his honours."

Here the King paused, and ran his eyes round the hall to see if his words went home, and still more to see if the mead had taken hold of his guests. The roar of applause

which followed his words, and the unsteady hands with which the horns were reached out for more mead, showed him that he had succeeded in both his designs. The Vikings listened to his words with all the ardour of men who had both eaten and drunk well, while their gestures showed that most of them had taken as much drink as they could well carry.

Convinced of this, so far as the great body of the Vikings was concerned, King Sweyn went on—

"We now come to the real business of this night. We are here, as you all know, to drink Strut-Harold's funeral ale, and to lead Earl Sigvald into his father's high seat—this seat in which I have been sitting."

As the King spoke he rose, together with his Queen, and both crossing the hall, gave their right hands to Earl Sigvald and Astrida and led them solemnly across the hall; at the same time, as one man, the Vikings and the King's bodyguard changed sides, so that Earl Sigvald and his men now sat on the right of the hall and the King and his men on the left.

When this changing of seats was over, the King rose in his new seat and said—

"Now we have led Earl Sigvald worthily into his father's high seat, and he is bound to drink himself into his heirship with the old pledges and vows. Fill him up his horn, Queen, that he may do his bounden duty to the dead."

It may seem strange that on great occasions Queens and high-born ladies should have been cup-bearers in the North; but if any one wonders at it, let them remember that the ways of every age are not as ours, and that Queens in this respect only played the part which the Valkyries and shield-maidens bore in Odin's hall in Valhalla. Up rose Gunnhilda, therefore, and taking a huge horn, twice the size of that which Sigvald had already drained, filled it with brimming mead, and then tasting it, stood before the Earl and handed it to him, saying—

"With this horn, Earl, drink thyself into the inheritance of thy father, Strut-Harold."

Earl Sigvald then, while all in the hall

looked on, drained the mighty horn, and called out—

"Now have I, Sigvald, Harold's son, the King's Earl in Scania, drunk myself into the inheritance of my father, and have fulfilled the law."

Having said this, he was about to set his foot on one of the two low posts which stood before the pillars of his high seat, and to utter the usual vows, when King Sweyn rose and said—

"Before you make your vow, noble Earl, listen to my words, for I, too, have a solemn duty to fulfil."

While Sigvald and the rest looked at him in wonder, the King went on—

"It is not to awaken memories of strife that I go back a few years: and not so many, either, for it is not more than five or six since my father, Harold Bluetooth, died. It is not, I say, to rouse strife that I go back to my father's funeral ale, and recall to your minds how it was marred by that arrow which Palnatoki owned to be his. You may not remember, Vikings of Jomsburg, but I and my men remember, that my duty to my father was but half fulfilled on

that noisy night. Though I drank myself into my father's high seat, I never made my vow upon the post, and so it has stood down to this very day. This is a duty which every man, from the King on the throne to the lowest freeman in his cabin, owes to the dead, for the dead, they say, take pleasure in the bold words of those they leave behind them as their heirs. I ask, therefore, before Earl Sigvald makes his vow, that I may have leave to make mine also, and in so doing be sure, ye Vikings of Jomsburg, that I will set you an example which such bold warriors will not be slow to follow. For ourselves we have many enemies, and therefore it is that we need friends like you. The man against whom I harbour the greatest grudge is Earl Hacon, of Norway, who has proved himself a traitor both to my father and myself in many ways. But for all that, there is one man I hate more, and whom it is the more needful for me to pull down."

Here the King paused a little, and then seeing nothing but applause in the faces in the hall, went on—

"How say you, noble Sigvald, you are now

Captain of this feast sitting in your own hall; may I have leave to drink a horn like you and make my vow?"

"So far as my leave goes, lord," said Sigvald, "you are free to make any vow, and as for what you say of Earl Hacon, he has no worse enemies than the Vikings of Jomsburg. Fill up the horn, Astrida, and bear it to the King, that he may drain it, and make his vow, after that I will follow with mine."

While Astrida was filling the ample horn, King Sweyn called out—

"Now that we are in the humour let us all make vows. After I have made mine and Earl Sigvald his, all the Viking chiefs shall come forward and make theirs; for at such seasons, over Bragi's bowl, as our forefathers called it, every man in his degree is bound to vow a vow."

By this time, Astrida, beauteous as the loveliest of shield-maidens, stood before the King with the brimming horn. As she tasted it, she handed it to the King, who drained it, and then taking a mighty breath, he stepped out of his high-seat, and setting his right foot

on the low post before it on the right, called out in a voice of thunder:

"This is the vow I vow. I vow before three winter-nights are past that I will drive Ethelred of England out of his kingdom, or slay him in the field, and so win his realm."

A roar of applause greeted this bold vow, and, as soon as it abated, up sprang the indefatigable King again.

"I thank thee, noble Sigvald, for letting me make this vow. I would I could have chosen Hacon, but Ethelred's downfall suits my ambition better. It is sweeter to pull down a king than to chastise a vassal, but, in so doing, I have left the easiest task to you and your Vikings; for we all know that there are no men in the North or West who can be compared to your famous Company for valour, and you may do what mighty kings would fail to accomplish. Make your vow now, therefore, and do not forget Earl Hacon."

Led on by this guileful speech, Earl Sigvald sprang up and left his seat. Then setting his right foot on the post, he called out—

"This is the vow I vow. I vow to harry Nor-

way before three winter-nights be past, and either to have driven Earl Hacon out of the land, or slain him; and if I fail in this I will lay my bones there."

No words can describe the joy which their Captain's bold words caused among the Vikings.

Full as they were with ale and mead, they felt sure every man of them that the rule of Earl Hacon was already over, and they clapped their hands and shouted with delight.

Nor was the King less pleased when he found how readily Earl Sigvald had fallen into the snare he had laid for him.

"That I call," he shouted across the hall, "a right good vow. Now things begin to go as they ought at such a feast. A good beginning is half the ending, and if you only fulfil bravely what you have vowed so boldly, your battle against Earl Hacon is already won."

Then, with scarce a moment's pause, he said: "Fill up the horn again, Queen, for we have more vows to hear. Fill it high to the brim, for the next I call on is Thorkell the Tall."

As the gigantic Viking strode up to the post before the King's high-seat, Gunnhilda filled

the horn, and, as he took it from her, the King called out:

"Now, Thorkell the Tall, your turn comes. Take care you vow a big vow, for no little vow can come out of such a tall man's mouth."

"I have thought over my vow, lord," said Thorkell, "and here it is. I vow that I will follow my brother Sigvald, and not fly so long as I can see the stern of his ship before me. That is my vow on water, but if he fights on land, then I vow that I will never fly so long as he is in the field and I can see his banner before me."

"Not a bad vow," said the King, "though a little backward for so daring a man; but you are a fine fellow, and no doubt will fulfil it to the utmost. Who comes next? Let me see!"

Then, in the next breath, Sweyn called out, "Bui the Stout, it is now your turn, and we all look for a big vow out of your mouth. Nothing less can come from the stout son of Veseti of Bornholm."

Slowly Bui the Stout stalked along the hall, and the Queen had the horn of mead ready for

him long before he stood before the King. He was not long in draining it, and then he said:

"This is my vow, lord. I vow to follow Sigvald in this voyage to the very uttermost of my manhood and bravery, and not to fly till fewer are left standing than have fallen, and after that still to hold on as long as Sigvald wills it."

"This is just the very vow we guessed you would make. All your words are sure to be full of valour. Let us next hear your brother Sigurd's vow; he will not be far behind you we are sure."

So Sigurd surnamed the Champion came forward, drained his horn of mead, and said:

"Short is my vow, lord. I vow to follow my brother Bui, and not to fly till he is dead if that is fated."

"This vow, too, is as we thought it must be. It is easy to see that you twain, Bui and you, would be in one boat in this matter. But whom have we next? Ah! Vagn, Aki's son."

Then he went on—"Come hither to your vow. Vagn, Aki's son, I long to hear what vow you will make. We all know that time out of mind,

your race has bred daring blades and gluttons in fight."

Up came the fair lad before the King's high seat, the very type of Northern manly beauty with his ruddy face, deep blue eyes, and golden locks. As he reached out his hand eagerly for the horn Sweyn said:

"Now we shall hear the boldest vow of all."

When Vagn had drained the horn he said: "I know not, lord, whether this will be the boldest vow of all, but be sure none of us has vowed a vow which comes more from the heart than mine. My blood burns to harry Norway and pull down Earl Hacon. I will follow Sigvald and my kinsman Bui in this voyage, and hold on as long as they are both alive; and as for my own vow, it is this—I vow, if I reach Norway, to slay Thorkell of Leira, and make Ingibeorg his daughter my wife, with or without the consent of her kin, or else I will never come back to Denmark again."

"This vow again," said the King, "is just what I expected. Thou art before all men that we know, for valour, and courtesy. Mayst thou keep thy vow."

Then gazing round the hall he said, "Be there any more? Yes! one I see. Come up, old Beorn the Welshman, my messmate of yore, and make thy vow; for I am sure thou must have a weighty one to make."

"As for this cruize to Norway," said Beorn, as he took the horn and drained it at a breath, "I am as glad of it as a girl of her first lover. My vow is a short one, lord, I vow to follow my foster-child, Vagn, so long as life and sense and strength last. And if I may add anything to my vow, I vow to do all I can to keep him from marriage, which will be, if it has not already been, the ruin of the band."

"Very good vows, messmate," said the King, "though the last comes rather late into the field; and now, that we have finished all our business, let us drink a few more horns, and then let us sleep on these things as best we can."

It may surprise many of our readers to hear that this Bragi's bowl or horn, over which these solemn vows were made, was by no means the last of those which had to be drained that night. Horn followed horn in rapid succession, some

in honour of the ancient gods, others to the archangel Michael and the Christian saints in whom the Danes had just begun to believe. But all things must have an end, even a funeral ale in the tenth century; and so the Queen and her sister having retired with their women as soon as the vows were over, late on in the night the King and his men and their guests staggered out of the hall and sought their beds; and Strut-Harold's funeral ale, at which so many proud vows had been made, and from which King Sweyn hoped so much revenge, came sleepily to an end.

CHAPTER VIII.

AFTER THE ALE.

It was not to be expected that either King Sweyn or Earl Sigvald would be fit for any reasonable discourse till towards the dawn. Both threw themselves into bed like logs or alligators into a pool, and there they remained snoring for some hours. We choose to turn to the royal chamber first, and to see what the King and Queen had to say to one another when Sweyn regained his senses.

As he slowly opened his eyes, Gunnhilda greeted his returning consciousness with—

"Well, lord, was not my counsel the better? Now you will have your revenge without the disgrace of burning your guest in his own hall."

"Revenge," said the King. "It is quite true I long for revenge against Sigvald, but how I am to get it unless I take it myself, I cannot see."

"Do you mean to say," said Gunnhilda, "that you do not remember making all those fine speeches to Sigvald, and your vow, and his vow, and his followers' vows?"

"I remember speaking and trying to set him against Earl Hacon; and, if he would attack him, I said I would attack Ethelred; and then I remember a lot of vows and horns and toasts, but what it was all about—beshrew me if I can tell."

"How provoking," cried Gunnhilda, "that a man should be taught to do a thing, and do it after all so neatly and cleverly too, and then forget all about it as if it were something that never happened."

"Ah!" said Sweyn. "It is all very well to talk of forgetting, but you forget at the same time, what the old saw says, "Ale is another man.'"

"I know a proverb," said Gunnhilda, "which says that when 'the ale is in the wit is out,' but here it seems that when the ale was in the wit was in too, and now that the ale is out the wit is out as well."

King Sweyn, it will be seen, was in much the

same, and, perhaps in a worse state than King Burislaf after his conversation with Sigvald, which Astrida had to remember for him. All that had passed,—homage, funeral ale, vows and revenge,—seemed to spin round in his head as chips in an eddy: as soon as he tried to grasp one it was whisked off, and the result was endless confusion.

"I tell you what, Gunnhilda," he said, "you must tell me the whole story from beginning to end; for by the time I meet the Vikings at the morning meal I must at least know what I have vowed and what they have vowed."

"You remember, I suppose," said Gunnhilda, "how you and I agreed yesterday, ever so long before the Vikings landed, that you should lead them on to make vows against Earl Hacon, while you were to vow to pull down Ethelred of England. That you know was no sacrifice on your part, because you tell me you have long ago resolved to conquer the kingdom of that unready King."

"Yes," said Sweyn, slowly, "I remember I was to do that, and I have some recollection that I tried to do it, but how I did it and what

vows the Vikings made passes my wit to say."

"You not only did it, but did it well," said Gunnhilda, "I was quite proud of you; and Astrida, who at any rate has all her wits about her, told me when we parted last night that she was in despair at the way in which you had led Sigvald and his Vikings into an expedition against King Hacon."

"And did they really vow to attack Earl Hacon," cried Sweyn, who was gradually coming to himself. "Then, it may be, my revenge is not so far off after all."

"Be sure of it," said Gunnhilda, "and all that you have to bear in mind is that you have vowed to conquer Ethelred's kingdom within three years, and they have vowed to kill or drive Earl Hacon out of Norway within the same space. To that undertaking you must hold them; and if they are held to it and even helped in doing it, you must be gainer in any case, as all the loss on each side must fall on those who are your enemies and the foes of Denmark."

"See now," said Sweyn fondly, "what a

good thing it is to be married: I should never have remembered a word of all this, or if I remembered it at all, it would have been all upside down;—perhaps, that they were to attack Ethelred, and I Earl Hacon. What a treasure of a wife you are to me, Gunnhilda."

"For one thing, and to one man, you ought to be grateful; first, that you are married to me, and the second to Earl Sigvald, for you know it was Sigvald that first brought us together."

"I have not forgotten it, and am not likely to forget it," said Sweyn, surlily. "But do you know—now that you have told me all this, and I know what to remember and to do—I think I should like to sleep still a while, my head is so heavy."

"Sleep on, lord," said Gunnhilda, "I will take care to wake you in good time for the morning meal."

Then, as Sweyn rolled over, and again became a log, she said to herself—

"What brutes men make of themselves with their drink; from my old father, King Burislaf, to this young husband of mine. How fair and grand his head, for all that, looks in his sleep. I

wonder if he loves me, as he says, so very much."

Now we leave the royal pair and turn to the chamber of Astrida and Sigvald, where very nearly the same scene was being played out.

If the truth be told, Astrida had been more wakeful and anxious than her sister, who truly said that King Sweyn had pledged himself to nothing to which he had not already made up his mind. He had little to lose in an expedition against the unready King of England; but her husband was pledged, in a mad drinking bout, to attack the redoubted Earl of Norway, whose cunning and whose power had so often foiled the designs of his foes.

It is probable, therefore, that Astrida did not allow Sigvald to slumber so long as King Sweyn; and that, as soon as she thought he had slept off the worst of his carouse, she tried to recall him to his senses.

But in both King and Earl the process of awakened consciousness was much the same. At first, when Sigvald at last opened his eyes, it was only to find that he remembered little or nothing that had passed during the vow-making.

"As for vows," he said, "of course I know I must have made one to give King Sweyn a fifty-oared ship fully manned and trimmed, and all carved and gilt from stem to stern."

"You vowed nothing of the kind," said Astrida. "You must guess again."

"I remember something about Ethelred," said Sigvald, vaguely. "Did I promise to join in a cruize to England next summer?"

"Ethelred was named, but you made no vow about England. It was something quite else."

"Ah, yes!" said Sigvald. "Now I remember it. I vowed something about Earl Hacon; but, for the life of me, I cannot say what it was."

"But I can," said Astrida; "and my sister Gunnhilda can, even if every one else forgot it on each side of the hall. You vowed over Bragi's bowl, with your right foot on the post, to harry Norway, and kill Earl Hacon, or drive him out of the land, or else to lay your bones there. It was a noble vow, and you will have to keep it, or be a niddering to your father's memory."

"What a fool I was," said Sigvald, "to drink so much ale and mead before I made my vow; but what I have vowed I must keep, and now the only thing to be done is to see how we may come best out of this peril. So, help me, Astrida, with some good counsel, and tell me what to do."

"'Tis a hard matter to advise on," she said; "but if I were you, when I met the King at drink over the morning meal, I would be glad and merry, and show no sign of care. I am quite sure that King Sweyn will remember your vows, and remind you of them; for if drink had driven them out of his head, my sister would take good care to bring them back. She has a spite against you, Sigvald, for taking me instead of her: to that of course you must have made up your mind from the first."

"I don't see why she should," said Sigvald.

"Ah!" said Astrida, "this is another of those things that no man sees, and all women can see. That is a slight which no woman either forgives or forgets."

Then she went on—

"But to come back to your vows. As soon as the King puts you in mind of them, you must say, 'Ale is another man, lord; and had I been not so drunk, I would not have opened my mouth so wide.' Then you shall go on to ask the King what force he will add to yours, that you may fulfil your vow to the letter; and mind, all the time, that you are thoroughly good humoured and merry with the King, and make as though all depended upon him, for he believes that he has now got you under his thumb; and ask outright how many ships he will add to yours if you can make up your mind to go."

"If I have vowed, I must go, either with the King or without him," said Sigvald.

"Now don't speak as if the ale were still in you," said Astrida. "Of course you must go; the only question is, how you may best go and best bring the King into this quarrel with Earl Hacon. If he takes what you say kindly, and yet will not say how many ships he will add to yours, you must press him hard, and make him say at once the number; and be sure you say

that you must have a good many, as Earl Hacon is so strong."

"But why should I say all that in such a hurry?" said Sigvald.

"Do you ask why?" said Astrida. "Because I am sure so long as the King thinks that you cannot or will not stir without him, he will be very liberal in promising his ships, for he will think that the cruize will never happen, if he believes it will start a long time off. But if you tell him you mean to set off at once, before he has passed his word to let you have the ships, then I think you will get little or no help from him, when he sees the danger staring him in the face. Besides which, if you say you cannot move in the matter without his help, he will be all the more likely to give you force to start you, for his great delight would be that either you or Earl Hacon should come to grief, and his greatest of all that you should both be ruined. Never fear, then, that he will not help you; only ask boldly, and you will get what you want."

"I am sure there never was such a woman for good counsel," said Sigvald, as

he jumped out of bed and threw on his clothes.

As he went into the court and so down to his ships, it must be owned, that most of the captains he met, except Beorn and Vagn, seemed to think that something gloomy hung over them. They all knew, even those in whose heads the ale still worked, that something dreadful threatened them, that the Captain and the rest after him had vowed such vows that the band could never fulfil, and that their ruin was impending.

"I tell you what it is," said old Beorn, "I know all about it, and what the Captain vowed is a thing which the band may very well do."

These were the words which met Sigvald's ears as the veteran Welshman addressed a knot of the downhearted.

"Well said, Beorn, well said. I am glad your strong head bears witness to what I said, and to the ease with which I can fulfil my vow. I mean to fulfil it by the help of my good sword and those of the company."

"Bravely spoken, Captain," said Beorn, turning to him. "Do you know, this cruize

to Norway makes the blood run in my old veins as it used of yore. Quite another thing is this than dangling after pretty women and breaking the law. Now we shall have red wounds instead of rosy lips, and if we fall we shall at least fall in battle against a mighty chief."

"I am glad to find you so willing, Beorn. I was afraid lest some of the band might think we were not broad enough across the back to pull down Earl Hacon."

"Never fear them, Captain," said Beorn; "they are only anxious because there is hardly a man of us except myself who quite knows what it is you did vow. They say the mead took away their wits; as if mead ever took away a man's wits; why it puts wits into a man. As for me, as soon as I woke this morning I said to myself, 'Here goes for Norway! That was a grand vow the Captain made to kill or drive out Earl Hacon.' And the rest, I remembered them all, down to my own, and to what I said about keeping Vagn here out of marriage. Depend on it, Captain, marriage will be the ruin of the band, and not any expe-

dition to Norway. But when shall we set out, Captain?"

"That is just the question, Beorn," said Sigvald. "I wish to go soon; but much depends upon the King, and how much force he will add to ours."

"Add to ours, Captain!" said Beorn, in wonder. "What! is this to be a partnership cruize with King Sweyn? Are we not strong enough as we are?"

"Remember the old saw, Beorn,—'Two are better than one.' We shall need all the force we can get to pull down Earl Hacon, and besides we have much to gain if we can bring King Sweyn into the quarrel."

"Well, well, Captain, maybe you are right," said Beorn; "but I must say I don't like partnerships, and as to shares, how are we to share our spoil with the King's men?"

"We have got no spoil yet, Beorn," said Sigvald; "another old saw tells us not to count our chickens before they are hatched. But I cannot stay to talk. I tell you that this voyage will be very soon, but that is for your own ear; for the present I wish it to be thought that

we may not start for months if we start at all."

"All right, Captain," said Beorn, "now I understand it all. As I seem to be the only sound head of those who were in the hall last night, and as I alone know what happened, I shall just keep my secret to myself, and not pretend to be any wiser than my fellows."

"Just so," said Sigvald, as he went down to his ships only to find that there was a rumour on board that the Captain had vowed to seek Utgards Loki or perish in the attempt. For himself he did not attempt to undeceive the crews by telling them the truth, which, as we have seen, he had only arrived at by the clear head and quick wit of Astrida. When his boatswain asked him, therefore, whither the fleet was bound, and if it would start soon, Sigvald pretended to know nothing of the matter, and was glad when he heard the horns blowing to call the King's guests up to the hall for the morning meal.

"Now comes another trial of wit between Sweyn and myself," he said, as he clomb the hill. "Last night he outwitted me entirely

with his vows and his strong mead, let me see if I cannot match him in cunning this morning, and make him put at least one of his paws into the trap which Astrida and I have laid for him."

By this time he had reached the hall, and entering it with Astrida, who had waited for him, he saw King Sweyn and Gunnhilda seated side by side in the high seat opposite to that into which he had been led yesterday in room of his father Strut-Harold.

CHAPTER IX.

KING SWEYN AND EARL SIGVALD.

NOTHING could have been more free from care or trouble than Sigvald's face as he stood before the King and bowed before taking his seat. One would have imagined that he had passed the night in the sweetest rest. During the whole meal too he laughed and joked with Astrida and those nearest him; and King Sweyn and Gunnhilda, who both watched him narrowly across the hall, could not see that his bold vow had the least effect on his spirits.

"He is a wonderful man, lord," said the Queen to the King, "if he knows what he has vowed, and all the peril that lies before him."

"Perhaps he knows nothing about it all, and has forgotten it all just like me," said Sweyn.

"That is not likely," said Gunnhilda. "As-

trida is at least as watchful and wakeful as I am. She has no doubt told him all, and this is all a mask that he has put on. No man alive is more deep-witted than Earl Sigvald."

"We shall soon see," said Sweyn. "I will remind him of his vows as soon as ever the boards are cleared."

So the hearty meal went on, and when the boards were cleared, and the ale and mead began to foam and flow, King Sweyn rose in his high seat, and said out loud across the hall:

"How slept you after your vows, Earl; or does your back feel heavy this morning under the burden which you have undertaken?"

"I did sleep well, lord," said Sigvald; "and as for the burden, my back feels broad enough to bear it when I have so many brave men to share it with me."

"Norway is a great realm," said the King spitefully, "and Earl Hacon a mighty man to pull a rope against."

"True, lord," said Sigvald: "but if he have against him an Earl and a King and the Vikings of Jomsburg, and the levies of Den-

mark, even he may get the worst of it. Besides, we can take time. Much may happen before the third winter's night comes."

"How say you a King and an Earl, or an Earl and a King? No King that I know of has vowed to pull down Earl Hacon, but only Earl Sigvald of Scania."

"True, lord! I know that I vowed alone, and my captains after me; but, then, remember that 'ale is another man,' a man sober is quite another from the same man in his cups, and so it was with me and with all of us yester eve. Even your Majesty may have opened your mouth too wide."

"I only vowed what I mean to keep," said Sweyn, gloomily. "Ere the third winter night comes from this I will have driven Ethelred out of his realm."

"You are a mighty King, no doubt, lord," said Sigvald; "and if you take the sea before the three years are out with all the levies of Denmark at your back you may well keep your vow; but Norway is a more warlike land than England, or, at least, Earl Hacon, as we Danes have often found, is always ready. He is not

'unready,' like the Saxon Ethelred. We Vikings, too, though we are very strong, are not as strong as Denmark, and I am not as strong as thou, lord. We may well think twice, therefore, over our vows, and follow the folk of whom Gangrel Speedifoot told us, who, whenever they talked over any great matter talked over it twice, once when they were drunk and once when they were sober. We have vowed to harry Norway once when we were drunk, we may well think whether it is wise to attack Earl Hacon now that we are sober."

"Earl Sigvald," said Sweyn, sternly, "it is a thing unheard of in the North that a man should go back from a vow made over Bragi's bowl at his father's funeral ale. You will be a niddering and a dastard in every man's eyes if you do not fare to Norway to pull down Earl Hacon."

Earl Sigvald turned white at these words, but he answered at once:

"The vow that I have made, lord, I mean to keep, be sure of that. The only thing now to be thought of is how I may best fulfil it. Of this I have plenty of time to consider in the

three next years. If we cannot have your help we will go alone, and let the sword settle our quarrel with Earl Hacon. If so, we shall reap all the glory; but I thought that you too were as great or a greater foe of Earl Hacon than we who have but just come into this feud. Methinks it were wise not to lose the chance of putting such an enemy under your feet for the sake of a few ships and men."

The reader will have seen how cleverly Earl Sigvald had followed Astrida's advice in this discussion with the King. He had kept two points clearly before Sweyn, one that it was likely that there would be no cruize to Norway at all, unless he lent the Vikings some help; the other, that though the Earl meant to fulfil his vow he would take his time about it, and that, in fact, there was as little hurry for the Vikings' attack on Earl Hacon as for the King's expedition against Ethelred.

King Sweyn, too, was in the best of tempers, and overjoyed that he had made the Vikings gorge the hook which he had so cleverly baited to catch them. He now thought

them fast hooked, and was anxious that they should not shake the barb out of their mouths and escape, for want of a little address and management on his part. Still he went on and played them a little longer.

"It would be more glorious though for you, Earl Sigvald, if you did this great deed all alone, and could say, 'Lo! I have pulled down this mighty quarry, Earl Hacon the Apostate, all alone.'"

"So it would, lord, perhaps," said the Earl; "but then it is good to remember that a man can but do what he can, and that the hardest riddle in life is to know how far one's strength will serve. As a prudent Captain I wish to have thee with me, lord; and another thing, I think it rather a feather in my cap and an addition to my glory, if when these great deeds are spoken of in after times it shall be said, 'Those brothers-in-law, King Sweyn, Harold's son, and his vassal Earl Sigvald in Scania, together pulled down Earl Hacon the bad Earl of Norway.'"

This politic speech, so flattering to King Sweyn's vanity, decided the matter. He saw

clearly that it was not only his interest to help the Vikings and so avenge himself on Earl Hacon, but that in partnership with them he might share the spoils of victory, whatever they might be.

"I will give them a little help," he said to himself, "then if the expedition fails I shall not lose much, and if it succeeds I shall be partners with them and they can never say they did it all alone."

As he paused to make this reflection the Earl, who saw his advantage, pressed him hard and called out,

"Come, lord! speak the word. How many ships will you give for this voyage?"

"Let me see," said the King, "when you have made everything ready for the voyage, I will give you twenty long-ships, fully manned and in good trim."

At this the Earl smiled in scorn, and burst out with—

"Twenty long-ships, lord! Twenty long-ships! I should call that a good offer if it were made by some rich boor, some freeman who had laid up wealth; but it is not such

as a king should make, least of all such a king as thou art. Twenty long-ships, indeed!" and then the words ran round the hall, and there was a murmur of derision on the Vikings' side.

King Sweyn was plainly nettled, and frowned and put on what the chronicler calls his wolf's face.

"And what pray, Earl Sigvald, is the tale of ships that you think you must have if you have all the help you think you need?"

"My answer is all ready, lord," said Sigvald, "and I utter it at once, just sixty ships, all of them big and well manned and trimmed."

"Methinks, Earl," said Sweyn, "that now you open your mouth as wide for ships as when you vowed that vow against Earl Hacon."

"If a man once opens his mouth wide," said Sigvald, "it is not so easy to purse it up again. I suppose I stretched mine last night over my father's funeral ale and it has not yet shrunk this morning. But there is another thing I wish to say, lord, which is more to the purpose than to waste time in talk over

the width of a man's mouth. I will replace these ships of yours here when we go at last with others of my own, which will be more in number though not so big. This may be your gain, lord, for who can tell whether all your ships will come back, and if yours go not there is every likelihood that none of us will come back, for all lies in your hands, lord!"

King Sweyn's vanity was evidently touched by the end of Sigvald's clever speech. He thought over it a moment and then said—

"It shall be as you desire, Earl. The sixty ships shall be ready when you are ready. Make your plans, therefore, you shall have all you ask."

"A noble and a gracious answer, as was to be looked for, lord," said Sigvald with a smile. "And now I only beg that you will fulfil your promise soon, for we will sail for Norway as soon as ever this feast is over, at which we now sit. So make ready your ships, and if you lack sailors I will lend you some to man them. With sixty of your long-ships and ninety of mine, manned mostly by us Vikings, we shall do well. For the rest, we will leave all our

smaller ships, and some of our men to watch them, till we either return in triumph or you hear that we shall not return at all."

It was amusing to see how dumbfounded the King was at this sudden announcement, which was lost neither on Astrida or her husband. For a while he uttered never a word, and yet after all he spoke sooner than could have been expected.

"All shall be as you wish, Sigvald, but I own this has come on quicker than I thought it would. I scarcely believed you would blow your pipe so soon; but as you pipe I must now dance, and so you shall have the ships as soon as may be. And now, as this dry work is over, let us have some mead."

The horns were brought, and the rest of the morning meal passed by well and merrily. Now that the Vikings were in for it, and King Sweyn had so far thrown in his lot with them, all the captains were eager for the start, and, of course, none more so than the hard-headed Beorn, and the lover of Ingibeorg, Vagn.

"This I call a deed of derring-do in truth, foster-child," said the old Welshman. "Just

as King Sweyn was amazed to see our ships choking up the Sound, so will that crafty fox, Earl Hacon, grin in his hall when he hears that the Vikings of Jomsburg have come to look him up and make the land too hot to hold him in winter-tide. I only hope there will be no delay, that we shall sail as soon as ever we can, and that we may make at once for Drontheim, where, as we all know, the main-stay of the Earl's power lies. Thank Heaven, too, we shall have nothing to do with women in this cruize."

"Why, Beorn," said Vagn, "you forget my vow to marry Ingibeorg, Thorkell's daughter, while I am on this voyage, or never to return."

"No, I do not forget it," said Beorn, doggedly; "but I also remember mine, which was to keep you from marrying, and by all the gods I swear it, so I will."

"Shall we not linger in the Bay then, think you," said the lovelorn lad.

"Who can say, boy?" said the veteran. "Lingering in the Bay is only another word for losing time, when we ought to be making for the North as fast as we can. If we linger

in the Bay after we sight the Norway main, it will be loss of time and loss of life; for the Norwegians have keen eyes as well as we, and then Earl Hacon will know that strife is coming on the land and will raise his levies. If this cruize is to be a success we ought to take him unawares."

"Perhaps wind and weather may stop us," said Vagn.

"Perhaps they may, and if so, all the worse for us; what we want is a rattling southerly gale to carry us as far as Stad, and then another as sharp from the west to blow us on to Drontheim. If we can only get these two winds I shall worship Eric Windy-cap, the Swedish king, who used to set the wind as he turned his cap. I only wish I had that cap on board, or for that matter, that I had bought one of those ropes with knots in them which the Finns sell and you get a fair wind when you unloose them. It would come in very handy now."

So the two went on prosing and drinking, a fair pattern of what was passing all round the hall. After all the King was not sorry that he

had listened to Gunnhilda's advice and helped Sigvald with ships, while on their side of the hall Sigvald and Astrida were equally content with the success which had attended their scheme to draw Sweyn into the quarrel."

When the morning meal broke up, the King and Sigvald and Gunnhilda and Astrida stood out on the hill, talking of what had happened.

"What think you of this cruize, sister-in-law," said the King. "Should we wait, or set out on it at once?"

"I should think a child might see," answered Astrida, "that the sooner it is made the better. There is no hope of conquering Earl Hacon, who has conquered so many foes in his time, if the sailing of the fleet is delayed till he hears it is coming, and if you fail now, he will take such steps that you will never pull him down. There is only one counsel to take, therefore, and that is, to set about the task as soon as ever you can; to let no news of your coming precede you; and so take the Earl unawares. If you can do this, and seize the Earl and kill him, as he deserves, you may harry Norway, though I do not think you will ever subdue it. If you

do not, look out for a sharp tussle, many hard blows, much loss of life, and after all, perhaps, nothing worth having, save the fame, which will live so long as the North lasts, of having dared to sail to attack Earl Hacon in winter-tide."

"Spoken quite to my mind," said Sigvald.

"And to mine," said the King.

"And to mine," said Gunnhilda.

So it was settled that the Vikings should sail as soon as ever they could, and in the meantime all the havens were to be closed to out-going ships, lest any trading ship should carry the news of what was coming on his realm to Earl Hacon.

On all hands it was admitted that no time was to be lost, if Earl Hacon was to be trapped. The reader will have remarked that Earl Sigvald was not so much anxious to get men from King Sweyn as ships, which could equal the largest of his own, and so much better fitted, both to face the Norway main, and to contend with Earl Hacon's navy. As we have already said, the greater size of a long-ship not only gave her greater speed in a

cruize, but the height of her sides out of the water gave her a decided advantage in a naval action, as her crew were better able to shower their darts and arrows and stones on their enemies' heads than if they attacked them in a smaller ship; but even if the battle went against them so much that the foe tried to board, such attempts were much more easily prevented from a ship which towered out of the water over her assailants.

To ninety long-ships, of fifty oars each, of his own, the Earl added sixty of the King's, of the same size, and as many in their crews. That made up what the Northmen in their liberal way of reckoning—and which we may remark still lingers in England, especially among fishermen—called a long hundred, that is, one of six score to the hundred, making one hundred and twenty, and thirty more. With these hundred and fifty long-ships, and twelve thousand men, mostly his own Vikings, Earl Sigvald might well ween that he was a match for any levies that Earl Hacon could raise before the invaders fell on him; and so the preparations for the expedition went on merrily and speedily, and,

in fact, as soon as King Sweyn's sixty ships had been thoroughly overhauled, the fleet might be said to be ready to start. The little delay there was arose entirely out of the necessity for caulking and paying the seams of the King's ships, most of which had been for some time laid up for the winter; and when this had been done, the stores and crews shifted out of Sigvald's smaller vessels, and all defects made good throughout the fleet, it was pronounced ready to sail.

CHAPTER X.

OF HACON, THE BAD EARL.

Now we leave the Vikings busy with their preparations, and turn with our story to Norway. In an instant we take the reader with us to Gudbrandsdale as it ought to be called, and not Guldbrandsdale as it is known to modern tourists, famous in the history of the 17th century, as the scene of the destruction of Sinclair and his Scots.

Much about the time that Strut-Harold's funeral ale was held in Scania, a feast was being held in Gudbrandsdale, by no less a person than Gudbrand himself, from whom the beautiful dale took its name. This wealthy yeoman was one of the greatest of Earl Hacon's liegemen, who was not called, at least not then, "the bad," except by his enemies abroad, and by the Christians, whose faith he had been forced to adopt, and which

he had taken the earliest opportunity to shake off. Connected with the royal race of Harold Fairhair, he, and his fathers before him, had been Earls at Hladir, or "the Barns," the centre of the district of Drontheim, the sturdy freemen of which had so often settled the fate of Norway, as they sided with this or that claimant to the throne. As for Earl Hacon himself, after many perils and long exile in Denmark at the court of Harold Blue-tooth, with whom he had been forced by the Emperor Otho to become a Christian, he had succeeded, not only in cutting off Harold Grayfell, the grandson of Harold Fairhair, but in seating himself as absolute ruler in Norway. If he had been of the direct royal race, he might have taken the title of King, but as he was not, and as his fathers had been Earls before him, he remained an Earl to the end of his reign, content with the reality, and not caring for the empty title of sovereignty.

Our readers will also remember that at this time all through the North of Europe a struggle was going on between the heathen and the Christian faiths. As is always the

case when a new belief begins to invade an old, the Christians were characterised in general by a zeal and devotion which the best intellects of the heathens no longer possessed. Such were the men whom we have met among the Vikings, who, as they said, belonged to neither creed; to them the ancient gods had been deposed, and the new not enthroned in their stead. To use their own expression, such men trusted in themselves. As for the great mass of the natives of the North, and especially of Norway, they still clung blindly to the old faith, and when the Norwegians, and most of all the stout men round his hall at Hladir, or "the Barns," heard that their Earl had thrown off the milk-sop faith of the Christians, and had again acknowledged the supremacy of the ancient gods, they supported him on what we should now call old conservative principles, and would hear of no rival to his power.

It will be seen from this that Earl Hacon played in Norwegian history very much the part of Julian the Apostate, in the earlier Roman world, and having returned to the worship of

his forefathers, fulfilled all its ceremonial to the uttermost.

It has been said by some who follow the lead set by Tacitus in his "Germany," that the ancient Teutons worshipped their gods in no temples made by hands; in thick groves under stately trees they believed the gods to delight, for they thought their majesty was too awful and immense to be contained within walls of wood or stone. If this were the custom of old in Germany proper, it was certainly not so in that branch of the Teutonic or Gothic race which had settled themselves during their great migration in the Scandinavian peninsula. The Swedes, from times of the most hoary antiquity, had ever worshipped the gods of Valhalla in their great temple at Upsala; in East Gothland the Gothic division of the race had temples of their own, which they only abandoned after a long struggle for the common worship at Upsalà. In Norway there were temples in various districts of the land; and in the time of Earl Hacon two are specially named, one, the greatest of all, near his hall at Hladir, and another, the second in size and

grandeur, near the house of his friend, Gudbrand, of the Dale.

It is to the house of this Gudbrand and to his hall that we now introduce the reader, begging his pardon for all this dry preface, which is really necessary if he wishes to understand the story.

On his way to his old friend's house from Hladir, the Earl had taken the route which modern travellers still take. Where mountains stand in the way, man must go to the hill and not the hill to him. The Earl crossed the Dofra Fell therefore with his body-guard, struck into the lovely Romsdale, ascended it to the watershed, and then descended into Gudbrandsdale along the bank of the river which runs through the valley to the Mjösen.

As we must get on with our story, we will suppose the journey safely accomplished, and Earl Hacon sitting in the seat of honour opposite Gudbrand in the spacious hall which almost rivalled that of Strut-Harold. The fires burned bright, and they were needed, for it was on the 25th of October, and the next night, that of

the 26th, was reckoned the first winter night, to be welcomed as the hardy Northmen greeted the winter, by a great sacrifice and eating of horseflesh.

Gudbrand of the Dale was an old man, with a long white beard, one whose counsel was now better than his arm, but on one side sat Thrand, his son, a man in the full vigour of his manhood, and on the other a burly Icelander, named Rapp, whom, by the sacred rights of hospitality, Gudbrand had taken in as his guest for that winter.

And now let us look at Earl Hacon, the Bad, as he was called abroad but not yet at least so known at home. Hacon, Sigurd's son, Earl of Hladir, was a man rather strong than tall; he was no giant like Thorkell, and certainly no such champion as Vagn, Aki's son; but for all that he had been a bold and lucky warrior, as when he fell on King Harold Grayfell and slew him with the help of Gold-Harold, Harold Bluetooth's brother, and then almost without taking breath turned on his ally, and slew him and his men, thus avenging himself and his friend Bluetooth on a foreign enemy

and a hated brother and rival in two rapid blows.

But it was rather for his head than for his hand that Earl Hacon was famous. He it was who had planned the scheme which brought Harold Grayfell to the place where he was cut off. He it was who pointed out to Bluetooth that when Gold-Harold was weak after the struggle with the Norwegian King, it would be easy to get rid of his unruly relative. He it was whose policy for a while kept off the Emperor Otho's force. And finally, he it was who having persuaded Bluetooth to let him return to Norway as a Christian and a vassal paying tribute and holding the land under the Danish King, had thrown off his new faith and the tribute together, and held Norway against the King and the Emperor for years.

To look at, this politic Earl was rather swarthy, a hue not reckoned beautiful in the North; but for all that he would have been reckoned handsome, had not his fine straight features been so often clouded by gloom, or worn the mask which cunning throws over a face and gives it an unreal, dishonest look. It

was a common remark that, with all his wit, Earl Hacon seldom looked any one full in the face, and yet all the world knew that he was the least shy man in his dominions.

Such was the Earl, who for the rest could not be called tall, though his shoulders were broad and his frame stalwart and muscular.

By his side, on his right hand, sat a man from whom, when you had once looked on him, it was hard to take your eyes. He was tall, though not so tall as Thorkell, broad across the shoulders, slender in the waist, his limbs were stout, and yet shapely, and his feet and hands and ears small. His face was fair, in the best mould of the beauty of the North, his eyes large and of a bright blue; his nose straight, except that it turned up a little at the end; his mouth full, and his cheeks round. His hair, which was not so golden as that of Vagn, Aki's son, but still rather golden than red or yellow, fell in large locks down his neck; and over all these features played a cheerful pleasant expression, which showed that the man to whom they be-

longed, though brave and dashing in fight, would rather be friends than foes with all the world, and that if he had his way, he would, as they expressed it in that age, rather drink with it than fight with it.

And now the meal is over, and the horns pass round, and the ale opens men's mouths, and wit and mirth well out with the drink.

Just then Earl Hacon turns to his stalwart neighbour on the left,—on the right sat his eldest son, Earl Eric,—

"Tell me, Sigmund, Brestir's son, what manner of man is that who sits at Gudbrand's right hand?"

"That is Rapp, the Icelander, Earl," said Sigmund; "he came this summer to Norway in the ship of Kolbein of Drontheim; men say he slew a man out there, and was forced to fly the country."

"A tall man and a proper," said the Earl; "but unlucky looking. Why brings he his axe as well as his sword into the hall?"

"That too, I can tell, Earl, for I met him and Kolbein at a tavern before we left Hladir. He says his axe is the thing he most trusts in

on earth, and that is why he will never part with it."

"A bad faith—a bad faith," said the Earl. "Better trust in the gods; and most of all in those I adore—the Shield-maidens, Thorgerda and Irpa; and now I think of it, Sigmund, Brestir's son, what do you trust in?"

"My faith, Earl," said Sigmund, "is something like Rapp's. I neither trust in my axe nor my good sword, but I trust for all that in my own strength and might."

The Earl looked at Sigmund with his piercing brown eyes, and measured him from head to foot; and then asked—

"How old may you be, Sigmund, Brestir's son?"

"If I live this Yule over," said Sigmund, "I shall be twenty-seven."

"So I thought," said the Earl, "and that was why I asked you your age."

"How so, Earl?" said Sigmund.

"Because," answered the Earl, "your faith is only good for a young man. What will the man believe in who only trusts in his might and strength, when he grows old like Gud-

brand over against us? Better believe in the ancient gods with him."

"I have not thought of that, Earl," said Sigmund.

"You had better think of it," said the Earl.

"But what have the gods done for me?" said Sigmund, as if willing to justify himself. "First, they stood by and did nothing when my father and his brother were both slain in one day by their kinsman, Thrand, out in the Faroes. Then they suffered Thrand to sell us, after he had nearly starved us to death and shaved our heads like thralls. Then they suffered us nearly to die of cold and hunger on your Norway Fells when we were but boys in age, I and Thorir, my cousin, I mean. By our own strength we made our way to an outlaw in the thick wood, where we lived till we were almost grown up. After that, by our own might and will we made our way to thee, Earl, and thou, but not the gods, hast been good and generous to us; but even thou wouldst not have treated us so well had we not been able to hold our own and do many a deed of derring-do against thine enemies and the Vikings

of the East Sea. If we—for I speak of both of us—have done aught hitherto in life, it has been all our own doing, and not, that I can see, by any help of the ancient gods, who, if they had ruled over what is just and right would have taken care that Thrand should not have cut off our parents by guile and treachery, and that we should now rule the Faroes as our birthright, instead of being exiles here in Norway."

"Thou hast done much, Sigmund, Brestir's son," said the Earl, "and something tells me that much still remains for thee to do before thou layest thy bones out there in the Faroes. But in all that has befallen thee, be sure that the gods have had their share; for though even Odin himself cannot change either a man's fate or his own, he knows it at least, and helps a man all his life through, that he may fulfil it."

"And how may a man know his own fate?" said Sigmund.

"That is hard to say. Sometimes a man lives all his life without seeing it or knowing it. Sometimes he catches glimpses of it in dreams and visions, and in what men call here

in the North 'the second sight.' But whatever he sees, or whatever he knows, it is far better that he should neither see it nor know it, for fate is a thing unchangeable. And see, though Odin knows the fate of all men as well as his own, what grief and trouble it is to him to know that at the great day of doom, in the Twilight of the Gods, he too, great god though he be, must perish before the Wolf, who has been ordained since the beginning of all things to destroy him. But enough of this; I wish though, Sigmund, Brestir's son, that thou wouldst or couldst believe as I do in the ancient gods, and wouldst offer to them and worship them as I do in this holy temple in Gudbrand's Dale. To-morrow, we will visit it together. Perhaps Thorgerda Shrinebride the Valkyrie, to whom you have already sent so many warriors slain in fight, may make you some sign."

Then the Earl called across the hall to Rapp—

"Come hither, Icelander, that I may have some words with thee."

As the Icelander stalked across the hall, he

muttered something, and half raised his axe aloft.

"What was it that thou saidst, Icelander?" said the Earl. "Knowst then you not that in open hall a man should speak out?"

"What I said I said to myself, Earl," said the Icelander; "but if you must know what it was, it was this—'Blows are more to my mind than words.'"

"Very likely," said the Earl, "seeing, if all be true that I have heard, blows, and not words, brought thee to Norway. What is thy name?"

"Rapp, the son of Geirolf, Earl; and if you must know what brought me from Iceland, it was not words, or blows, but a ship."

"Indeed," said the Earl; "and, of course, such a mighty man paid a fine fare to Kolbein, for it was Kolbein that gave thee thy passage, and so saved thy life."

"I paid naught for my passage," said Rapp, sullenly.

"I know thou didst not," said the Earl, "and I will tell thee why; for, as the old saw says, 'an Earl's ears are long.' You bargained with

Kolbein to pay him a good fare in your utmost need, but when you ran in under Agdaness, down in the East country, and Kolbein asked you for the fare, you said the money was out in Iceland, and that you had nothing to pay. We are plain-speaking folk here in Norway, and to tell the truth, that we call cheating. I hope you will behave better to Gudbrand who has taken you in."

The burly Icelander looked as though he would have liked to try his axe on the Earl's head, and Sigmund and Eric both felt for their swords to ward off the blow; but the look of hate passed off, and Rapp only said—

"There is an answer to every charge, Earl; and my answer to this is, that I worked my passage; and if Kolbein dares to say that I did not the work of two men all through the voyage, and was not quite worth my salt, he is a niddering and a dastard."

"I know nothing about that," said the Earl. "It may well be so, for you are a fine strong fellow, and good at need, I daresay; but that part of the story was not what my long ears heard. But enough of this. We have all well

drunk," he said, addressing himself to Gudbrand, "and it is time to go to bed, messmate, and we have much to do to-morrow."

So the Earl rose, and all the rest, and sleep soon reigned supreme in the hall of Gudbrand of the Dale.

CHAPTER XI.

THE EARL AND SIGMUND VISIT THE TEMPLE.

NEXT morning was the 26th of October, the first winter night, as it was called; for the Northmen always reckoned by winters and nights, as we used in England, which may be seen by the terms fortnight and sennight—fourteen nights and seven nights. Every one rose early at Gudbrand's Grange—the old man himself, and Thrand, his son, and his fair daughter Gudrun, and the Earl and Sigmund. All went well and merrily. The old man chatted with Rapp, whose face was less sullen; the Earl was cheerful, the food good, and the ale strong. When the morning meal was over, the Earl said to Sigmund—

"To-night, you know, there will be a great offering at the temple, but before the sacrifice for winter's coming, have you a mind to go

with me to the temple and behold the images of the gods?"

"My wish, Earl, is to do as you wish," said Sigmund. "I am here as your liegeman, to do you service."

"Come, then," said the Earl. "May be the gods will be gracious, and give some token that they are pleased with you, and with us."

Leaving Gudbrand and the rest, then, the Earl and Sigmund set out, and walked for some time through the green firwoōd which clothed one side of the valley. As they went they followed a little track, which brought them to a clearing in the forest very like that in which that church in East Gothland stood, and there Sigmund saw a splendid building, fenced round with a high paling. It was all of wood, but of wood worked with wondrous skill. From all time the Northmen have been cunning carvers of wood, and the carpenters of that day had spent all their skill in making this temple a work of art. Even on the outside, too, it was richly gilded in many parts, and it was surmounted by a steeple, though there were no bells in it—those came in with Christianity—

surmounted by a gilded vane. In form, the temple was not long in proportion to its breadth and height, like a Christian church; but rather circular, with a dome supported on massive pillars, richly carved and gilded; but on one side of the circle was a recess, answering to the apse in a round church, into which, indeed, the old temple of Upsala was converted when the Swedes became Christians. The door was opposite to this apse, and by it the Earl and Sigmund reverently entered, with heads bare.

Inside, there were the images of many gods, no doubt of all the gods; but we only pause to specify three, as the divinities which the Earl and Gudbrand, who had built and supported this temple in common, particularly worshipped. First and foremost there was Thor, the tutelary deity of Norway, represented as driving his car, drawn by goats, and brandishing his hammer, in token that with it he would crush the skulls of the frost giants, the great enemies of man, and bring in the bright and genial summer with its thunder-clouds.

We forgot to say that the temple was a wonder of the age, for it was lighted with windows

filled with glass, so that the interior was light and bright, and there were no gloomy shadows thrown, as on the pictures and images of the saints in Christian churches.

But to return to the gods. Besides Thor, there were two images of goddesses, or, if we may call them so, female divinities or heathen saints—the two Valkyries, or shield-maidens, to whose worship the Earl was specially devoted. The first of these was Thorgerda Shrine-bride, and the second Irpa. Both these images were splendidly attired in silk and fine linen. On their bosoms they bore collars of gold and silver work, and on the right arm of Thorgerda Shrinebride, as well as of the other, was a heavy ring of gold.

As soon as they were close to the image of Thorgerda, Earl Hacon threw himself on the ground, and lay motionless a long time with his face between his hands. After that he stood up and said—

"Now you must make her an offering—that silver brooch which you have in your cloak, lay it on the stool which stands before her, and let us see what she will do."

With the air of a man who only half believes, and only does a thing because he is told to do it, Sigmund took out the brooch, and bowing, laid it on the stool.

"Now we will mark what happens," said the Earl. "If she accepts your offering and your service, I pray that she may let that ring slip off which you see she has on her arm; and if she gives it up to you, that ring will bring you good luck, Sigmund. But first I will try to take it off; mark if she yields it up to me."

Then the Earl tried to slip the ring off her arm, but it seemed to Sigmund as though she bowed her hand, and so the Earl could not slip the ring off.

Then the Earl threw himself on the floor again, and lay long, and when he rose, Sigmund saw his eyes full of tears, and then he said—

"Now you try to slip it off; I have prayed her to grant it."

Then Sigmund reached out his hand, and as he touched the ring it slipped off of itself, and he took it and put it on his own arm.

"See," said the Earl, "she gives it to thee, Sigmund; and now be sure never to part with

it, for it will bring thee good luck. Promise me that."

So Sigmund promised, and then they both left the temple and passed out again.

"How say you now, Sigmund?" asked the Earl, "are the gods and Thorgerda naught but wooden dolls, or do they give tokens to those whom they favour?"

"I must see more of their favour than giving me a golden ring—of which I have taken many for myself from a dead foeman's arm—before I quite believe in them," said Sigmund; "but if it gives you any pleasure, Earl, I will try to believe in them. May be they will be more gracious to me as my life goes on."

"Only try," said the Earl, "and you will soon believe in them;" and after that the two said little more till they were out of the wood, and had almost reached the grange of Gudbrand of the Dale.

When they had almost reached the house, the Earl said: "Methinks there is a flutter about the farm. Yonder runs Rapp, with his axe in air, and after him run Gudbrand's thralls. What may it be?"

To fetch something for the feast, may be," said Sigmund; "but whatever it is, we shall soon know."

As they entered the hall, there sat Gudbrand in his high seat, and before him stood Gudrun, his pretty daughter. They just caught his last words, in a scolding voice—

"I told thee, girl, what it would be, and not to listen to him."

"But I could not help it, father," said the girl; "I had no strength to resist him."

"Resist whom?" cried the Earl.

"Rapp," said Gudbrand. "Here he has been making love to Gudrun without my leave, and Asward, my bailiff, overheard him."

"And, pray, what did Asward overhear?" said the Earl.

"He heard Rapp ask Gudrun to fly with him this very night."

"That is a grave crime," said the Earl, "and clean against our law; but forewarned, forearmed. You know the worst, and so nothing will come of it. Of course, Rapp, in trying to beguile your daughter, has forfeited all claim for hospitality this winter."

"The worst of it!" said Gudbrand, testily, "you do not know the worst of it, Earl; for when Asward overheard Rapp, he threatened him with his axe; and then Rapp, the dastard, without more ado, dealt him his death-blow, and my bailiff is dead, all because of this silly girl."

"If he has slain your bailiff, he must either pay the blood-money for him, or abide the law, and be made an outlaw," said the Earl. "But let us not disturb the feast to the gods. To-morrow we will make a hue and cry after Rapp, and hunt him down."

Be it remembered that the bailiff was not a freeman, but a thrall, and their blood was held cheap in those times, and made little of by the Earl. But it was not so with Gudbrand, who bewailed him as a trusty servant and friend, or by Gudrun, who loved him; though it must be owned that some of her tears fell for this sudden parting from the unruly Rapp.

At last they were pacified; and when the time for the evening meal came, and the horse-flesh slain and boiled in great kettles in honour of the gods who were bringing in the winter

smoked upon the board, the feast began with great joy and pomp. All had partaken of the great dainty of that age—the meat of horses fattened for the purpose; and it is strange to mark that the abhorrence which some even now feel at such fare may be traced to the prohibitions issued by the church eight or nine centuries ago against food the mere partaking of which was looked on as the mark and test of a heathen man.

The boards had been cleared and the toasts and pledges to the gods were just about to begin, when Gudbrand's butler, who was also a thrall, entered with a face of terror and whispered something to his master which made him start up in his high seat, a movement which could not fail to attract the notice of the Earl.

"What is it, Gudbrand? Speak," he cried across the hall.

"The butler says, Earl, that the temple is on fire, and that we may see the flames above the trees."

"The temple on fire!" bawled the Earl, "then let us fly to quench the flames, lest the

images of the gods should perish. Up, Sigmund, to the rescue."

As he uttered these words, he rose from his seat, followed by Sigmund and his son Eric. Then the feast came abruptly to an end, and all the able-bodied men were soon on their way to the temple, which blazed fiercely through the trees, and threw a lurid light over the forest.

As they reached the clearing, the burning temple presented a sight even more splendid in its destruction than when Sigmund had seen it in the light of day. The flames lit up the whole clearing, and towered high above the trees; for they had now burnt their way out of the dome, and all hope of saving the shrine was over.

"Be these gods," said Sigmund to himself, "who cannot even save their own temple on one of the holiest nights of the year?" As he said this he felt the ring which Thorgerda Shrinebride had given him heavy on his arm. "This at least," he said to himself, "was worth saving out of the fire; and, see! I have it safe."

The Earl said nothing, but walked round and

round the building, gazing on the conflagration. Just then he was joined by Gudbrand, who had followed to the scene as fast as his old legs would carry him.

"A sad sight, a sad sight, Earl," he said; "and to think of all the pains and skill spent on what will soon be but a heap of ashes."

Still the Earl said nothing, but by the blaze it could be seen that his face was more black and scowling than usual. As there was a lull in the fire and the heat was less intense, Earl Hacon, followed by Gudbrand, Sigmund, and Eric, entered the paling and came a little nearer to the burning pile.

After they had walked a few yards the Earl called out—

"Look! what have we yonder?"

As he spoke he pointed to a bank on which lay three images which had plainly come out of the temple.

"See what power our gods have, Earl," said old Gudbrand in joy. "They must have walked out of the temple of their own accord."

"If they did," said the Earl drily, "truly it is wonderful that they did not bring their rings

and collars, and gold and silver gear with them. Did they strip themselves of all that wealth that they might leave it behind to perish in the flames? No, it is man's hand that has stripped them and brought them out, and this must have been done by some one who still believed in the old faith enough not to dare to burn the gods, though he did not scruple to strip them of their goods and then to burn their house. This is man's work,—I say it again,—and depend on it it is no other than Rapp's handiwork."

"How wise you ever are, Earl," said Gudbrand. "Of course it can be no other than that dastard Rapp, who first tried to beguile my daughter, next slew my bailiff, and now to spoil our feast and do us a mischief has set fire to our temple."

"How easy it is," thought Sigmund to himself, "to see a thing, when a quick-sighted man has seen it before you."

"When will this be avenged, Earl," he asked out loud.

"Who can tell, Sigmund," said the Earl. "Sometimes the gods are slow to vengeance, as they are often slow to be gracious. But, that

vengeance will come for this on the man that has done it, of this be sure. Even if he escapes in this life—though I do not mean to let him escape—he will be driven out of Valhalla in the next, and never come into the company of the brave and good. But let us take up the images of the gods, and bear them back to the grange. There let them stay till we can get them new bravery of gold and silver, and till we can rebuild this temple, which—I swear it—shall be rebuilt twice as grand as it was before."

Back then they went to the grange, but they had no heart to finish the feast which had been so disastrously disturbed. After one horn of mead, Gudbrand and his guests retired to rest; and the second day of Earl Hacon's visit to the Dales came to an end.

CHAPTER XII.

THE HUNT AFTER RAPP.

NEXT morning all in the grange were up betimes, for was not Rapp the manslayer and burner of temples to be hunted down by the whole strength of the Earl and Gudbrand? The morning meal, therefore, was soon despatched; and then every one that was able took part in the chase. Of these, none were so active as Thrand, Gudbrand's son, who put himself at the head of what we may call the beaters.

As they left the in-fields, near the grange, which were arable land, they passed by some rough land covered with juniper bushes and heather, and spread themselves over it to beat it thoroughly. The long line had about half cleared it, when Thrand, who was a little ahead, heard something that rustled behind a bush, and in another moment up started Rapp with his axe in air, and at one blow, dealt with his

overwhelming strength, bore down Thrand's sword, and, burying one of its points deep into his chest, gave him his death-blow. As Thrand's followers came up one after another, the burly Icelander gave them a blow right and left with his weapon; and, as the chronicler says in his terse way, "they needed no more."

Then he turned and fled, before the rest could come up; and, being one of the swiftest-footed of men, was off and away into the woods before any one could approach him.

As for the Earl he was beside himself with anger.

"Why were you not closer up to him, Sigmund?" he said; "for you alone of us can match him in speed and in dexterity with your weapons."

He said this, quite forgetting that Sigmund was in attendance on him, and that was the reason why he had not been closer up.

As soon as the Earl saw that Rapp had slipped through their fingers for the time, he said—

"Let him go for awhile; and now do you all of you rest a bit. As for me, I will go away

by myself; and my will is that none of you come nigh me. Perhaps the gods whom he has mocked and spoiled will tell me where Rapp is."

So the Earl went away by himself, and fell on his knees, and held his hands before his face. After awhile, he arose and went back to his men and said—

"Now I see it all clearly. Come along with me."

Then he turned thwart across the line of search which they had before followed, and walked till they came to a little dell; and they had hardly entered it before up sprung Rapp, with two gold rings, which he had taken from Thor and Irpa, upon his arms, and was off and away like a bird.

"There he goes, there he goes," cried the Earl. "Run, men, and seize the dastard!"

But Rapp had made a good start, and was so swift on his feet, that though Sigmund and the rest ran after him at their utmost speed he was soon lost in the wood.

"All this is no good," said the Earl; "let him go for the present, we shall find him it

may be at Hladir trying to get a passage out of the land."

"Thrain, the son of Sigfus," said Sigmund, "and the sons of Njal, lay almost ready for sea when we left Hladir. No doubt this Icelander will make for them, for they always stand by one another."

"All in good time," said the Earl. "The footsteps of the gods are not so swift as Rapp's, but they are sure. We will take up Thrand's body and bury it worthily, and then we will return to Hladir and see what we can do. There will be no fair wind for Iceland till we reach our hall."

In this perfect faith in the gods in whom he so thoroughly believed, Earl Hacon retraced his steps to the grange of Gudbrand, whom he found in great grief, as might be expected, at the heavy blow which had fallen on him in the slaying of his son.

"'Tis the will of the gods, old friend," said the Earl, "and we must all bow to it. Odin envied you the possession of so stout a son, and had prepared a seat for him in Valhalla, in which he will sit as soon as we have bound the

hell-shoon on his feet and buried him as he should be buried."

"The proverb says," said Gudbrand, "that 'bare is brotherless back', but a childless back is barer still. In an ill hour took I this Icelander into my house."

"Let the gods see to your revenge," said the Earl. "I hope to seize and slay him ere he can escape out of the land; but if I do not, be sure that Rapp will come to an evil end."

We need not dwell upon the burial of Thrand: he was buried much in the same way as Wolf the Unwashed, only with more skill and ceremony. When the funeral rites were over and a barrow befitting his birth piled up over Thrand's remains, the Earl left Gudbrand to himself, and made his way with all speed to Hladir, followed by Sigmund and his body-guard.

As he neared his hall and looked down from the hills on the Firth, Earl Hacon said to Sigmund—

"Said I not, Sigmund, that there would be no fair wind for Iceland ere I came? See, there lie the Icelanders in their two ships, Thrain, the son of Sigfus, and Helgi and Grim,

the sons of Njal. On board either or one of them must Rapp be."

Now we must go back a little to Rapp, and say that, swiftfooted though he was, he only reached Hladir a little before the Earl, and for a good reason—he walked and ran through wood and waste, while the Earl and his men rode. With all the start, therefore, that the delay during Thrand's funeral gave him, he only just reached Hladir before the Earl and his men. In his utmost need he turned to the sons of Njal and said—

"Help me, like good men and true, for the Earl is coming to slay me."

Then Helgi, the elder of the brothers, looked at him and said—

"Thou art an unlucky man, and he that refuses to have aught to do with thee would do best."

"I would," said Rapp, "that all evil might befall you for my sake."

"If evil befalls us," said Helgi, "I am quite man enough to revenge it in due time."

Then Rapp turned off to Thrain and begged him for help.

"What hast thou on thy hands?" asked Thrain.

"Burned a temple, and slain a man or two. The Earl will soon be at my heels, for he leads the chase himself."

"It hardly befits me," said Thrain, "to do this when he has treated me so well."

Then Rapp showed him the precious things which he had taken out of the temple, and offered to give them to Thrain.

"No," said Thrain, "I cannot take things stolen from the gods. I must have other goods instead of these."

"Well," said Rapp, "then I will take my stand here, and let myself be slain before your eyes; and then you will have to bear the blame of every man in Iceland."

Just then Thrain looked up and saw the banner of the Earl on the brow of the hill above the Firth.

"I will help thee," he said. "Get into the boat and shove off to the Vulture, my ship."

As soon as they boarded her, Thrain bade his men break the bottoms out of two casks, and when it was done, he said—

"Into these casks you must creep Rapp."

So Rapp crept into them, and then they were lashed together endways and thrown overboard, so that they floated, end up, alongside the ship.

Just when this was done, down rode the Earl to the shore. First of all he turned to the sons of Njal, and asked if Rapp had come thither.

"Yes, he came hither," said Helgi—

"And whither went he?" asked the Earl.

"That we were not careful to mark," said Helgi.

"I would give," said the Earl, "great honour to the man who would tell me where Rapp is."

Then Grim said aside to Helgi:

"Why should we not say? Thrain will repay us for our trustiness with no good."

"No," said Helgi, "we must not tell. His life lies on it."

"Maybe the Earl will turn his wrath on us," said Grim; "for he is so wrath that he must wreak his vengeance on some one."

"We must not mind that," said Helgi; "but still we will put our ship out from the

land, and sail as soon as ever we get a breeze."

So they rowed their ship out under an islet, and waited for a fair wind.

Meanwhile the Earl went round the ship-captains, and asked all of them if they knew where Rapp was; but they one and all concealed the matter, and said they knew nothing at all about Rapp.

"Well," said the Earl, "now we will go to Thrain, the son of Sigfus, my messmate. He will be sure to give Rapp up, if he knows aught about him."

So they shoved out a long-ship, and rowed out to the trading-ship. Thrain was on deck, and soon saw the Earl's course; and, as he came alongside, stood on the poop and hailed him kindly.

The Earl took his greeting graciously, and said—

"We are looking for a man whose name is Rapp, an Icelander; he has done us all kind of ill, and what we come to ask you is to give him up to us, if you have him on board; or tell us, if you know where he is."

"You know, lord, that I slew an outlaw of yours at the risk of my life, and for that I have had great honour at your hands."

"You shall have more honour still," cried out the Earl, breaking in, "if you can tell."

Then Thrain held his peace a little, and thought; but at last he denied outright that Rapp was there, and bade the Earl come on board and look for himself.

The Earl said he would not do that, and rowed back to land, and went away for awhile by himself; and, to tell the truth, he was in a great rage, and no man dared to speak to him. When he came back, the Earl said—

"Show me where Njal's sons are, and I will force them to tell me the truth."

But his men told him that the sons of Njal had put out to sea.

"Then that cannot be done," said the Earl; "but, now I think of it, two water-casks lay alongside Thrain's ship, and a man may well have been hidden in them; and if Thrain has hidden him, there he will be; and now we will go again to see Thrain."

Thrain soon saw that the Earl meant to come out again, and said—

"Angry as the Earl was when he was last here, he will be half as angry again now; and now the life of every man in the ship lies on it."

They all promised to conceal the matter, for every man was sore afraid for his life.

Then they took some sacks out of bulk, and put Rapp in their room, and laid some empty sacks over him, so that he looked like part of the lading.

Now comes the Earl just as they were ready with Rapp, and Thrain greeted him kindly.

The Earl accepted his greeting, but neither quickly nor kindly, and then they saw that he was very wroth.

"Give up Rapp, I say; for I am sure that thou hast hidden him, Thrain."

"And where should I have hidden him, lord?" said Thrain.

"That you must know best," said the Earl, "but if I must guess I should say that you had hidden him in those water-casks."

"I would not be charged with lying, lord," said Thrain, "rather than that, I would that you should search the ship."

"So I will," said the Earl; and boarded the ship, and looked about and found nothing.

"Do you say that I am guiltless?" asked Thrain.

"Far from it," said the Earl, "but I am sure I cannot say why we cannot find him; for I thought I saw clearly where he was when I was on land, but I can see naught when I come hither."

With these words he rowed back to land, and was so wroth that naught could be said to him.

At this time his son, Earl Sweyn, was with him.

"A wondrous temper is this," he said, "to let innocent men smart for a man's wrath."

The Earl then went aside by himself again, and in a little while he came back and said—

"Let us row again to them," and they did so.

"Why! wherever was he hid before?" said Sweyn.

"Never mind that now," said the Earl, "for he must be away from that hiding-place now. Two sacks lay there by the bulk, and Rapp must have been put in their place with the lading."

Then Thrain said, as he saw them rowing out again—

"See, they shove out their ship once more, and must mean to pay us a visit. Now we will take him out of the bulk, and stow something else in it, but leave the sacks lying loose, as they are." And they did that, and Thrain said—

"Let us stow Rapp away in the sail which is furled up under the yard." And that too they did.

Now the Earl comes alongside again, and was as wroth as could be, and said—

"Wilt thou give up the man now, Thrain?" and was worse even than he had been before.

"I had given him up long ago, if he had been in my keeping," said Thrain; "but where do you think he was, lord?"

"In the bulk," says the Earl.

"And why then did you not search for him there?"

"It did not come into our mind," said the Earl.

Then they hunted for him again all over the ship, but they could not find him.

"Will you bear me free now, lord?" asked Thrain.

"Certainly not," said the Earl, "for I well know that thou hast hidden the man away, though I cannot find him; but I had rather thou shouldst be a niddering to me than I to thee," and with that he rowed back to shore.

As soon as he had landed he said, "Now I seem to see that Thrain has hidden Rapp away in the sail."

Just then a fair breeze sprang up, and Thrain and his mates sailed off to sea; and as he ran out of the Firth he sang, in words which have been borne in mind ever since,—

> "Let us make the Vulture fly,
> Nothing now makes Thrain flinch."

But when Earl Hacon heard what Thrain had sung, he said—

"It was not my ignorance that had aught to do with this, for I saw it all clearly on land; but the gods of the sea are not those of the land; and, besides, this bargain that Thrain has made with Rapp, the sacker of temples, will drag them both to destruction in the end."

CHAPTER XIII.

PREPARATIONS OF THE VIKINGS.

WHILE these events were happening in Norway, the Vikings were steadily and rapidly pursuing their preparations; and if the gods in whom Earl Hacon believed so trustily had been as good to him as he was faithful to them, they would have given him some inkling of the peril that was coming on him.

At last everything was ready. The one hundred and fifty ships lay in the Sound, off Strut-Harold's grange; the smaller vessels of the Viking fleet had been weeded out; the crews that were to sail were picked; arms and weapons of strange shapes and enormous weight —pole-axes, halberts, bills, morning-stars, and maces—had been forged in great numbers, to crack the skulls and limbs of the Norwegians. Besides these, every man had his spear, sword,

broad-axe, and bow and arrows. Stones, which, as we have seen, were indispensable in the naval battles of those days, they did not carry with them. That portion of their dead weight they could find in abundance on the granite shore of Norway; but in all the rest, whether in ships, stores, weapons, or men, no such fleet had ever left the Danish shores within the memory of man.

It must be owned, too, that King Sweyn kept his word well. He kept it, perhaps, only to secure his revenge either on the Vikings, or on Earl Hacon, or on both, but still he kept it. The hulls of the ships he found were tall and stout, and the few men he sent brave and skilful warriors. The havens of the kingdom, too, he had kept firmly closed, and on the day that the Vikings were ready to sail, not a smack had left the Danish waters, to carry intelligence to the enemy.

And now came the parting—the parting of Astrida from Sigvald; for the rest of the band were not as yet encumbered with wives, and so had no leave-taking.

But that one parting was enough for all, for

Astrida now loved her husband as much as any woman could love a man.

But, for all that, there was a difference in some things between the love of those days and ours. It was not so demonstrative, and perhaps, therefore, more heart-felt. No wife in that age would have thought of hindering her husband, by tears, from doing his duty. No! she gulped them down, and rather looked on battle as the every day business of life. It never occurred to Astrida that her husband could be killed when he went out to fight; but, for all that, she could not bear parting with him.

"Lucky woman," she said to Gunnhilda, "to be a Queen, and sit at home with King Sweyn, while all the rest of the world go out to war."

"Ah! sister," said the Queen, "but you forget King Sweyn has vowed within three years to drive King Ethelred out of his kingdom."

"Three years!" repeated Astrida, "what are three years."

"A very short time," said Gunnhilda, "I

seem to think they will be over in no time."

"And I," said Astrida, "think them an eternity. How happy could I be with Sigvald all that time, if he had not to set out at once to Norway."

"Why, it was your own doing! who but you hurried on the attack on Earl Hacon?"

"I hurried it on," said Astrida, "because I thought it was for Sigvald's good, and for the good of the company. Whoever will cope with Earl Hacon, and harry Norway, must be up early, and not let the grass grow under his feet."

We do not know whether our readers have remarked that among those who vowed at the funeral was one Sigurd the Champion, Bui's brother. Well, this Sigurd was, we are afraid, an unearnest man. He had been married as a family sacrifice, when that feud between Strut-Harold and Veseti of Bornholm was made up, to a daughter of the Earl, named Tofa. Whether he did not like being thus offered up on the altar of friendship, or whether it was that Tofa's temper was incompatible, which we

think most likely, certain it is that not long after the wedding he went off with his brother Bui to Jomsburg, left his wife behind him on her father's hands, and joined the Vikings.

We are not aware whether there were any scenes between that pair when Sigurd arrived with his brother in Scania, to drink his father-in-law's funeral ale; but there at any rate he found Tofa, and had of course to give an account of himself. Whether this were satisfactory or not will be best seen from the following story of what passed between them on the morning before the Vikings sailed.

"Now Sigurd," said Tofa, "the day is at hand when you are to sail, and you have vowed to follow your brother Bui well."

"So I have," said Sigurd, "and I mean to keep it."

"If you will do that," said Tofa, "I will wait for you till you return, and swear never to marry any other man."

Whether this made Sigurd as ashamed of himself as he ought to have been, and brought him to a sense of his long desertion, who can tell? but he answered, as in duty bound—

"That is very good of you, Tofa."

"Much better than you deserve, I know," said Tofa, "but if you keep your vow, I will keep mine."

"One thing I would like to know," said Sigurd, "and that is, what use you mean to make of those two raw-boned ill-looking men who are always hanging about the house doing nothing?"

"I had meant them to do a good piece of work," said Tofa, "and that was, to take your life for your bad behaviour; and now I have thought better of it, and I mean to put them to another use."

"And pray what is that?" said Sigurd.

"I mean to give them to Bui, my old love," said Tofa. "He was the man I wished to marry, only he would never ask me, and though you are a much handsomer man, still you cannot compare with Bui."

After this Sigurd thought it not worth while to carry on that conversation any farther, and luckily Bui the Stout just then came up.

"Come hither, brother-in-law," said Tofa,

and when the ugly though stalwart champion stood before her, she said, "I have a gift for thee, Bui, and I only wish I could give myself as well away to you."

"I am sure I do not," said Bui, "I have no wish to wed, and least of all my brother's wife."

"But you will take my gift," said Tofa.

"Not till I know what it is."

"It is one you may well take," said Tofa, "and you may find it useful. The gift is two of my men—one called Havard Hardhitter, the other Aslak the Baldpate of Bornholm—and why I give them to thee is, that I know they will stand by thee."

"I will take the men," said Bui, "for good men are scarce. Havard I will keep myself, and Aslak I will give to Vagn."

"So they are," said Tofa, "and good husbands too. How I wish I had been wedded to thee!"

"That cannot be," said Bui.

"I know it," said Tofa; "and so there is no help for it."

The reader will see from this that all

northern wives were not like Astrida; nor, for that matter, all husbands like Sigvald.

The evening before the Vikings went, King Sweyn gave them a great feast at one of his granges on the other side of the Sound, much about the spot where the city of Copenhagen now stands—Copenhagen, that is, the Chapmens' or merchants' haven; for in its excellent port the traders of those times used to lay up with their ships, and great fairs and marts were held there for goods.

We are not about to describe the feast, which was like all feasts, except to say, that, after the eating was over and the boards cleared, King Sweyn rose up and made the Queen fill up a huge horn of mead, and then pledging Sigvald he called out—

"I drink to thee, Earl Sigvald, and to the speedy destruction of all my enemies."

Then Sigvald took the horn which the Queen handed to him and said—

"I accept the toast, lord, and drink to the destruction of all your enemies and mine."

"Mark you that, foster-child," said Beorn

to Vagn. "They might just as well drink to the destruction of one another; for, except Earl Hacon, there is no man that the King hates so much as Sigvald, and I should say, Sigvald hated no one so much now as the King for having led him into this snare."

"I do not call it a snare," said Vagn; "and I do not see why they should not be good friends. When we pull down Earl Hacon no men will be more glorious in all the North than we Vikings of Jomsburg."

"When we pull him down," said Beorn. "Have you thought since, foster-child, of that dark gloomy chief whom you saw in your vision sitting on a log when we were all bound? may-be that was Earl Hacon."

"I have not thought of him or of the vision," said Vagn; "but it might well be Earl Hacon, for he is said to be dark and gloomy-looking."

"Why saw you not the end of it, foster-child?" said Beorn; "then, perhaps, we might know all that is to befall us."

"I do not care what happens," said Vagn, "so that we go to Norway and stay in the

Bay, and I see Ingibeorg the Fair, and fulfil my vow."

"And I, too," said Beorn, "hope we shall go to Norway, and that you may not see Ingibeorg, and that I may fulfil my vow and save you from marrying."

"We shall see, we shall see," said Vagn, impatiently.

"But see," said Beorn, "the King rises, and Sigvald and the Queen and Astrida. To night it is early to bed and early to rise, that the Earl may part from his wife. Thank heaven! to-morrow night we shall be well on our way, and beyond the reach of any women to disturb our drinking and our rest."

Thus growling, the veteran left his seat, and sought his bed.

"And so you are really going, really starting to-morrow," said Astrida to Sigvald; "and when will you come back?"

"Perhaps never—perhaps very soon," said Sigvald. "That depends upon Earl Hacon."

"And are the Norwegians so very terrible in battle?" asked Astrida.

"That remains to be seen," said Sigvald.

"To me one thing alone seems terrible, to part from thee."

"'Tis all in the day's work, sweet love," said Astrida. "So set sail with a stout heart and never doubt that thou wilt return triumphant."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE VIKINGS SET SAIL.

With all their speed, it was mid November before the Vikings set sail; and in November the northern days are short and the northern seas rough and gurly. Still the morning of their departure from the Sound was clear and bright, and a fair south-westerly breeze sped them on their way.

There, on the hill on which Strut-Harold's grange stood, King Sweyn and Gunnhilda saw the last, for the time at least, of their unruly and unwelcome guests; while at their side was Astrida, her proud heart swelling at the grand spectacle as the gallant fleet spread its wings and passed on to what she fondly hoped would be a new triumph for her husband and the Vikings.

"There they go," said the surly Sweyn, "to their tussle with our traitor Earl Hacon. Even

though my ships never return, it will be a cheap loss for Denmark if the Vikings that man them are lost with them."

"Nay, King!" cried Astrida; "say rather, There they go—your gallant allies, who will pull down Earl Hacon and his children and restore Norway to you, her rightful ruler."

"Nay, sister," said Gunnhilda, "say rather, There they go—that ambitious Earl and his unruly men, who from their robber nest have so vexed the Baltic shores, and defied and humbled the kings who were their liege lords."

"Why quarrel with the man who made you Queen of Denmark, sister?" retorted Astrida. "Why kick down the ladder which helped you up to your present height? Had it not been for Sigvald and his clever counsel, you would have been still in our father's grange, and the Wends would have been still tributary to the Danes."

"Clever counsel, indeed, sister!" cried Gunnhilda. "I know some one of whose counsel Earl Sigvald was glad to avail himself, and that was you, sister. It was not out of his own

breast that Sigvald sucked the craft and guile which has stood him in such good stead."

"By which, as it seems to me, sister, you have profited most. Why grudge Sigvald the honour which he has fairly won?"

How much longer the sisters would have continued to cap speeches it is hard to say, but King Sweyn brought them to an end by turning to leave the hill, and saying—

"How women's tongues wag! Earl Sigvald is a gallant man, but it is not in my heart to forget or forgive all the insults he has put on me, even though he has gotten me a noble queen. Besides, he and his Vikings are a thorn in the side of Denmark; and so I wish to see them humbled, and their power broken. Then they may be useful as vassals and allies; just now they are too mighty to be aught else than rebels. And if"—he went on with a lowering brow—"they can clip Earl Hacon's wings, and maim their own hands in doing it, I shall be all the better pleased; for I shall be avenged on both my foes at once, and both will be crippled in wreaking my revenge. But see they are all under way; and now, may sail and oar

speed them safely to Earl Hacon, and may their meeting be bloody and their battle doubtful ! "

With these words, King Sweyn descended to the shore with his Queen to embark in his "War-Snake" which bore him over to one of the granges in Zealand.

As for Astrida, she paced slowly to Strut-Harold's grange, where she had to wait for news of the ill or well fare of her husband's expedition. There we leave her to spend her time in spinning and sewing and wishing and longing—a Northern Lucretia happily without a Northern Tarquin—and pass on with the Vikings on their adventurous voyage.

All that day, with a fair wind right aft, the ships of the Vikings flew swiftly on their way. In the night they made the shores of Jutland, that peninsula which tapers out in the Scaw of infamous repute for reefs and breakers and storms, and to which, in all ages, sailors have been careful to give such a wide berth.

But the fleet has not yet reached the Scaw. In the night, long before that headland was discovered, the wind chopped round to North

and East, and Sigvald and his ships preferred rather to beat into Liim-Fjord than to pass the rest of the night in withstanding the buffets of the short seas, which now rolled in upon them right in their teeth.

If any reader should ask, what and where is Liim-Fjord,—we reply, that it is a long Firth which the sea has eaten nearly through Jutland; and which, though not accessible to large vessels in these modern times, was a real harbour of refuge for the long-ships of the tenth century. In those waters Earl Sigvald's fleet lay snug for two days while their leader and his captains fretted at the delay and felt sure that all Norway would be up in arms to receive them when they made the coast.

Of these grumblers we may be sure that Beorn was one of the loudest mouthed.

"Here, again," he said to Vagn, "we see another proof of what the Captain calls prudence. I call it rather cowardice. Here we are like mice in a trap, wind-bound and land-bound, while some fast Danish yawl, the master of which has none of the Captain's prudence, has beat across the Bay, and carried

the news of our coming to Thorkell of Leira. Take my word for it, they have sent out the arrow of war, and raised the whole country even by this time."

"But you know, Beorn," said Vagn, "whatever the swift yawl may have done our longships could never beat across the Bay in this weather. No one is more eager than I to meet Thorkell of Leira, my old enemy; but even I think it better to put in here for a while than to lay my bones in the Bay. The flounders would now be dubbing at our limbs thirty fathoms deep had we tried to cross the Bay last night. Remember Calmar Sound."

"Aye! aye! lad!" said Beorn. "I shall remember Calmar Sound all my life; but there is another thing that I remember, and that is the old saw, 'Nothing venture nothing have.' This is an expedition quite by itself, and that's why I like it. It is all dash, and no forethought; or, to speak better, the time for forethought is over and the time for dash is come, and if the Captain runs into every inlet because he meets a breeze in his teeth, we shall never pull down Earl Hacon. I should like to

know what old Palnatoki would have said could he have seen us turn aside into this Firth?"

"Palnatoki," said Vagn, "had he commanded a fleet like this, manned by so many thousands of the bravest hearts in the North, would have done as Sigvald does. The leader of a mighty armament is bound to be more prudent than the chief of a Viking squadron."

At this reproof, old Beorn burst out into peals of laughter.

"How we apples swim," at last he cried, "to think that I should live to hear Palnatoki—the boldest sailor that ever stepped, and the wisest too, and the craftiest—compared with our politic Sigvald, whom you forced to turn on his heel. Well, wonders will never cease, and the longer one lives the more one learns."

"My grandfather was a great captain and a wise, foster-father," said Vagn, "and he founded our Jomsburg, but he never had the force at his back that now follows Sigvald. He left the company a plant, and now behold it a tree. He might have been such a chief as Sigvald,

but he never was; and of one thing I am quite sure, had he been as powerful as Sigvald now is, he would do as Sigvald now does, and spare this noble fleet—bound on an adventure such as the North has never yet seen—the buffets of a foul wind, long after the first winter night is over, in the billows of the Bay."

"Say what you will, boy," answered Beorn, indignantly, "I say the times get worse, the men lazier, and the ships slower than they were of yore. Hempen rope and mast of fir were never snapped or sprung when I first went to sea. I tell you, you are all a generation of milksops when likened to the beaten blades whom Palnatoki led."

So the two warriors spun out the day while the fleet lay pitching at anchor in the Fjord where the water was not very smooth, even under the shelter of the Jutland sandhills. Outside in the Bay, or what we now call the Skager-rack, the short seas got longer and longer, and the white horses shook their snowy manes, and few were found to follow Beorn in his regret that the fleet was not exposed to their fury.

So all that day and the next night, Earl Sigvald and his ships lay safe. Early on the morning of the second day the wind veered round to the old quarter. It was a circular storm in fact; and, though the waves were still high, the wind was fair for the Bay, and to sea the fleet went as soon as it could weigh anchor.

As Beorn's ship bounded over the billows, the old Viking's face brightened, and he roared out to Vagn, to whose ship he kept close company—

"A race for Tunsberg, foster-child."

"With all my heart," said Vagn, as his war-snake rose upon the wave, while Beorn's was buried in the trough of the sea. "With all my heart, foster-father. Leira is not far from Tunsberg."

As the wind and waves bore the ships apart, the words which Beorn uttered in answer were lost, but his face could be seen, and it was plain that just at that moment he thought his darling foster-child much more of a milksop than any thing else.

All that day, and the next night, and the

next day they sailed across the sea of Jutland, which we now call Cattegat, and struck across the Bay for the town of Tunsberg, the capital of the province. As the hummocky hills of that part of Norway loomed bigger and bigger on the horizon, the hearts of the Vikings beat high, as they felt that they bore the tidings of their coming with them, and that at the dead of the next night they would fall on their foes in Tunsberg. As they neared the land, the politic Sigvald passed the word round to lower the sails half mast high, and even to back the oars in some of the swifter vessels that they might not be descried from the shore before nightfall, and that they might take the Norwegians unawares.

This stratagem was completely successful. In that dark November night, and unseen by any man, the fleet under half sail, ran silently into the river on which Tunsberg stood; and when the towns-people were warm in their beds, the Vikings were stealthily preparing to land and carry fire and sword into the streets. If anyone asks whether this is true warfare, we answer, Yes, the greatest warrior is the chief,

who prepares most surprises for his enemy. So it has been in all times, and so it will ever be in war. It is never made with rose-water, and the captain, who neglects to fall on his enemy unawares, is only making so many coffins for his own men.

So Sigvald and some hundreds of his Vikings pushed off from the black ships in boats, which were slowly sculled towards the shore.

And now, had Tunsberg been a modern fortress in their front, it would either have found Sigvald's ships out long before the Vikings could have landed, and at once blown them to atoms; or his ships, had they been armed with thirty-ton guns, would have treated Tunsberg in the same way; but it must be remembered that Tunsberg was an open town built of wood, with grass-grown streets and yards. We are writing, in fact, of a time when there were few fortresses, and when the Vikings owed their existence to having one of those rare exceptions in their own hands.

So here we have the Vikings and the Norwegians brought face to face, except that it was

a dark and misty night, and that the Vikings were armed to the teeth in their boats while the Norwegians lay warm asleep in their beds, and little dreamt that anything could befall them in that wintry season.

CHAPTER XV.

THE LANDING OF THE VIKINGS.

SOME of our readers will ask, Though Tunsberg was no fortress in the tenth century, was there no governor, no mayor, nothing even that answered either to our old watchmen and new policemen? To this we reply, that there was some such authority even in the tenth century, only, on this night he happened to be in bed, and was literally caught napping.

A few words will explain the nature of this authority. All over Norway, even in that age, were a set of officers called the King's liegemen. They were freemen who had gone over, as it was called, into the King's hand and become his vassals for pay or lands. This class answered pretty nearly to the feudal barons, except that the Norwegian liegemen were more profitable servants to the Crown than our Norman barons often were. In whatever place

or district they might be they were bound to represent the authority and interests of the King as against that of the allodial freeman who held his land by no grant from the Crown, and whose interests often clashed with those of the royal house. A man of this class there was at that very time in Tunsberg, only he was a-bed, and, though the proverb says, that the King's eyes are far-sighted and his ears long, for he sees and hears through the eyes and ears of his servants, — of what use are those ears and eyes to any royal servant when he is a-bed and asleep?

We not only know that there was such an officer in Tunsberg when the Vikings landed, but we can tell his name. It was Ogmund, Ogmund the White; and he was not alone, for he had a band of house-carls and thralls with him. In addition to this, there were the townsmen, all the freemen who could swing a sword or string a bow; but alas! like Ogmund and his men, every one in the place was sound asleep when the boats of the Vikings grated on the gravel of the shore.

No! in all Tunsberg—it was not a very large

place, though it was the capital of the province—there was not so much as one watchman awake. "Why," the good people of Tunsberg thought, "should we watch at this season of the year, when the winter night is long passed, when merchants and Vikings have laid up their ships, when we are at peace with all the world, so that neither Swedes nor Danes trouble us, and when we have Earl Hacon to keep unruly spirits quiet, and, though last, not least, when Ogmund the White is here, the King's liegeman to take care of us?"

So they all slept, and Ogmund the White slept; and Sigvald, and Bui, and Vagn, and Beorn, and a whole host of Vikings landed and rushed just at midnight into the town.

As they dashed up from the shore of the river they raised their war-cry, which sounded very much as the Modoc or Mohawk war-whoop used to sound, and, perhaps, still sounds. Man is true to himself in all ages, and, therefore, we may be sure that when the seven chiefs who were banded against Thebes, raised their larum on its walls, or, when the British infantry cheered

as they rushed up the breach at Badajoz, or the Red Indian howls as he rushes on to scalp his foe, the effect is much the same on the ears of the invaded side. Anything but pleasant must any of these war-cries or whoops or slogans be to drowsy sleepers, who are surprised in their beds and can scarce rub their eyes before their throats are cut and the breath out of their bodies for ever.

This again is war; very pleasant to the conquerors, and altogether the reverse to the conquered; and in this, too, it has been the same in all ages.

So on one side we have all the Tunsbergers sound asleep; and the Vikings, with Sigvald at their head, storming into the town.

We all know, that in modern warfare, towns are only given over to plunder in extreme cases, and when the besiegers' blood is up after obstinate resistance. But in old times, war always meant plunder; and the Vikings were no exception to the customs of their age. As soon, therefore, as they entered Tunsberg they began to break into the wooden houses and to slay the inmates, whether with or without arms

in their hands; though, to tell the truth, every man in the place had his weapons handy, and if he failed to reach them it was only because he was heavy with sleep. Thus, the Vikings went along the streets, breaking open houses, and sacking them after they had disposed of the owners of their spoil either by death or flight. How could they see to do these deeds? some one will ask; for it was a pitch dark November night. That question is soon answered. The houses were of fir, and embers glowed on every hearth. As soon as the first house was sacked, it was set on fire; and the further progress of the Vikings was lighted by a blaze which would have put all our gas-companies to shame and made them blush at the poorness of the light which they provide for the community.

In that ruddy glare, any Tunsberger who was cool enough to consider calmly what was passing, might have seen the stalwart forms of Sigvald and his men entering house after house; and then, after a short sharp struggle, returning to the street, dragging out women and children and heaps of spoil into the middle of the

street. Every now and then a man, one or other of the townsmen, would dash out of the doorway of his dwelling; in most cases to be pursued and cut down before he had gone a few paces, and very rarely to escape by swiftness of foot.

Above all, rose the roaring and crackling of the flames as the fire past from house to house, amid which, the shouts of the plunderers, the shrieks of women and children, the howling of dogs, and the lowing of kine, were hardly heard except as one subdued murmur.

All this, we say, might have been seen and heard at once by any inhabitant of Tunsberg who cared to listen to and behold them; but in that supreme moment every man was too much engaged with his own peril to attend to anything except his own defence and safety.

Many brave deeds were doubtless done, many strong strokes dealt, and many a brave man slain, in withstanding the Vikings, as dwelling after dwelling was invaded. But all these isolated acts of bravery were useless. Man after man fell, and house after house was sacked and blazed up in flames; and all the

while the Vikings made their way rapidly to the centre of the town.

At last they reached a wooden building greater than the rest, and which had a loft above it, in which men slept.

Before this the Vikings made a halt, and held a council of war, if it may be so called.

"Welcome to Norway, noble Earl," said Vagn to Sigvald. "Now you are taking a brave seizin of the land."

"Talk not of seizin till the whole town is our own," answered Sigvald. "Even with the odds so much against them, these Norwegians deal shrewd strokes. 'Twas only at the last house that the owner smote down with his axe three of our men before he fell."

"He that hunts the bear, and seeks him in his den, must not complain, though he feels the bear's hug," said Beorn. "It makes one proud of one's foes to think they can smite so stoutly. But what was that?"

As he uttered these words an arrow hurtled through the air, and a Viking by Sigvald's side fell dead to earth.

"Said I not truly?" said Sigvald. "Half

won may still be lost. This strong house is full of men be sure, and they will not yield without a struggle. On, men! surround the house, and then let us break into it!"

This, we must inform our readers, was the great house of the town—the mayoralty, or castle, or government house—and in it were Ogmund the White and his men, who, awakened too late to make a stand against the Vikings out of doors, had made up their minds to defend the house, which was built of massive beams, as long as they could. For this purpose, one body of them held the doorway—the only access to the hall, for the windows were mere slits high up,—while another manned the loft or upper chamber above the hall, where the windows, though more like those of modern houses, were still higher up.

It was from one of these windows in the loft that the fatal shaft had been launched, which dealt the Viking, who had just fallen at Sigvald's side, his death-blow.

The orders of Sigvald were soon obeyed. On all sides, back and front, the Vikings surrounded Ogmund's house—which was now, in

every sense, his castle—and sought how they might make their way into it. On this siege, as it may be called, all the efforts of the Vikings were now concentrated, and so, in the rest of the houses, the inmates had time and warning to escape from the coming danger.

For a while it must be said that the defence of Ogmund had much the better of the attack. Behind the half-doors of the double porch he, and a chosen band of men, hurled spears and shot arrows so fast and well against the Vikings, that it was as much as they could do to hold their own behind their shields in the open street. As for coming near the door, that was out of the question.

At the same time, the bowmen in the loft were as busy above as their comrades below; and many a Viking trod the path to Hell or Valhalla, as the case might be, following the steps of him that first bit the dust before Ogmund's house.

Meantime, as his men fell fast, Sigvald fretted and fumed, and was at his wits' end to take the house.

"We shall have to take to fire at last," he

said, "that I can see, and either burn or smoke them out; but I am ever loth to treat brave men like cats or foxes in holes."

"So am I," said Vagn. "Far worthier, therefore, is Frey's good sword than Loki's flame. Spare the fire still a while, Captain, and let us break in some other way."

"Why not try Hrolf Kraka's way?" said old Beorn, who now came up with a big purse of silver in his hand. "This," he said, "is for the common stock, Captain;" and with these words, he hurled the chinking purse on a pile of spoil. "But there will be time for spoil under the spear to-morrow. Now let us be thinking of taming these townsmen. Why, I say, will you not try Hrolf Kraka's way?"

"And what was that?" asked Sigvald.

"I should have thought you all knew it," said Beorn, "and did not need to be told it by a Welshman like me. Well! you see when Hrolf Kraka was shut up like a fox in his hole by King Adel in his hall at Upsala, he and his champions got a long beam that lay in the hall, and, using it as a battering-ram, they knocked out one of the timbers of the side-wall,

and so made their way out. Now a thing that is good to make a way out, is also good to find one's way in; and my advice is to get a long beam out of one of these houses, and then to use it against the side-wall with all the force of as many men as can lay hold of it, and drive it along, and then we shall soon break into the house, and clear yon fellows out of the porch."

"Right good counsel," said Sigvald. "Here, comrades, some of you follow Beorn, and bring the longest and strongest beam you can lift; and then drive it against the side-wall till it yields before you."

So said so done. It was not long before the beam was brought and used with the full force of twenty men as a battering-ram—old Beorn standing foremost, and giving the word of command before each stroke. They chose, of course, the opposite side of the hall from that on which the windows of the loft looked, and thus were not exposed to the arrows of the bowmen. It took some time to batter in the massive timber, and the twenty men were twice changed, all except old Beorn, who still

clung to his ram; but at last the hard firwood began to groan, and crack, and split, and in a little while the beam fell inwards with a crash, and the ground floor of the hall was open for any who dared to enter it by that breach.

The shouts of Beorn and his band told Sigvald and the rest of the Vikings on the other side of the house of the success of this stratagem; but, if this roar of triumph had not reached their ears, they would have seen that their hour of reckoning with Ogmund was come by the sudden disappearance of most of the garrison from the porch. Most of them turned indoors with Ogmund to hold the breach, and but a few bowmen were left in the doorway.

Quick as thought, Sigvald was at Beorn's side to consult on the best plan of attack.

"There is the door to the bear's den open," said Beorn; "but, may be, the first in will have his ribs crushed by Bruin himself."

"What shall we do, Beorn?" asked the Captain.

"Do, Captain!" roared out Beorn, with something very much like contempt. "Do!

why storm the hall by this breach and by the doorway, on both sides at once. Why in the world did we knock this hole here if we are not to go in by it?"

With this advice, Sigvald flew back to the front of the hall to order the onslaught on that side, while Vagn went round to the breach to storm it in company with his old foster-father.

As he saw him approach, the veteran roared out—

"Here's fine work, foster-child! flights of arrows, hurtling of spears, clash of swords, and roar of flames! What fairer sight could man have—far fairer than any charms of women!" And then he sang—

> "Red wounds are lovelier than the rose,
> Or rosy lips to me."

"The Captain bids me say, foster-father,' said Vagn, "that he will rush on to the onslaught as soon as he hears our war-shout."

"Well, then, now for it! 'Jomsburg for ever!'" roared out Beorn, in a tone of thunder, and heard above the roar of flames. "'Jomsburg for ever!' And now, foster-child, we'll

make a race of it for first in through that hole in the wall yonder."

"With all my heart, foster-father," said Vagn. And then the two rushed at the breach.

Beorn tried his best, but Vagn was younger, and swifter, and was first in, receiving a sword-stroke on his steel cap, which made his ears tingle, and a spear-thrust on his shield, which would have hurled him out again, had not Beorn backed him up so closely, that he thrust him in before him. As he followed his foster-child, the old veteran dealt his death-blow to one of the Norwegians, who was brandishing his sword, and aiming at Vagn's neck.

At the very same moment, Sigvald and his men forced their way in through the porch; and Ogmund and his followers, finding themselves attacked in front and rear, fled as fast as they could up the ladder which led to the loft. But if the reader will only bear it in mind how hard it is for several people to climb up a ladder at once, they will easily see that if Ogmund, with one or two others, got safe into the loft, it was as much as they could do.

The rest—and those were by far the greater number—were left to the tender mercies of the Vikings, and were slain to a man, though, before they fell, they, too, left their mark on the foe.

Still, the house was not won. As soon as ever Ogmund, and the few that were fortunate enough to follow him, had fled up the ladder, it was drawn up into the loft, and through the trap-door ever and anon a spear was thrust, or an arrow shot down on the crowd of Vikings in the hall below.

"These men take a deal of killing, Captain," said Beorn to Sigvald. "See, there falls Andrew the Red, shot through his brain-pan with an arrow from above."

"There is but one way," said Sigvald, moodily. "This is a fight where all the loss will be on our side, for they can reach us, and we cannot reach them. They will never yield, save to fire or famine."

"Then let it be fire, Captain," said Beorn, "for if we stay to starve them out up aloft, we may have to yield to fire ourselves. These red flames will raise the whole Bay."

"Vagn," said Sigvald, "take a bowman, and let him tie a bit of hemp on his arrow, and set it alight and shoot it up on the shingled roof; and now let the rest of us clear the hall, and bear out the dead of both sides; and then let us kindle a fire beneath them, and then they must soon yield when they are between two fires."

This, too, was done almost as soon as it was said. Vagn's bowman soon shot his blazing arrow on the wooden shingles of the roof, where it smouldered a little, and then burst out into a bright flame. Meantime the dead had been borne out on shields, the bowmen in the loft forbearing to shoot while this ceremony was going on, and beginning to ply their shafts as soon as the melancholy procession was over.

About the same time, smoke began to mount into the loft from the ground floor of the hall; and just then a red ember fell through one of the rafters of the roof. Then Ogmund and his men felt that they were in very truth between two fires, and that they had no chance left them but to yield or die.

"Now men," said Ogmund the White—who,

though young in years, was one of Earl Hacon's trustiest liegemen—"Now men, the time has come when we must make up our minds either to yield or to be burnt alive. For my own part, it shall never be said that one of Earl Hacon's liegemen yielded to an unknown foe; for we know not whence these men come, nor aught about them, save that they are stout and shifty warriors, and many at muster. Still less is it to my mind to be burnt in here, and yet it must come to one or other of these things if we stay here and do nothing."

To these words some of his men said one thing and some another, and the end of it was that most of them were for asking peace from the Vikings if they could get it.

"In that case," said Ogmund, "as ye are for yielding and asking peace of these strangers and Vikings—though I never saw such a Viking band before—my rule over you is at an end; and now I am free to shift for myself and to take no further heed of you. Say men, am I free, and have I done all for you that I could?"

"You have, you have," said all with one voice.

"Well, then," said Ogmund, "it is ill talking with a fire below and a fire above, and a band of Vikings hemming one in on all sides; so I will tell you in a word what my plan is. I mean to leap down into the yard on to that heap of litter under the gable from the window, and see if I cannot make my way out of the town, and bear these tidings to Earl Hacon."

"Better yield with us, and ask peace of the foe, Ogmund," said one of his men. "'Tis twenty feet sheer, and though a man may well jump down that height, and fall on his feet; what is the use of coming down standing, if your head is to fly off as soon as ever you reach the ground. Better stay with us."

"My mind is made up," said Ogmund. "Say the word, as time and the fire press, and I can scarce breathe for smoke. Will any of you leap out of yon window with me, and cut our way through the foe?"

"I will, and I, Ogmund," said two of his followers.

"So said so done," cried Ogmund; and without more ado he leapt out of the gable window,

and the two others after him as quickly as they could.

It is sometimes said that the leader in an enterprise runs the greatest risk, but it was not so in this case. It happened that when Ogmund leapt from the window there was no one of the Vikings near but Vagn, and he was not near enough to reach Ogmund till he had recovered the shock of his fall, and was in the act of running for his life. All the Viking chief could do was to make a sharp stroke at him with his long sword as he passed him, and that blow was enough to cut off Ogmund's hand; but, as he still ran on, Vagn was about to pursue him, when down almost on his head came two more men out of the loft. One of these he slew at a stroke, and away flew the unhappy wight's head, who thus met the fate predicted for Ogmund. The other, in like way, was slain by Bui, who hastened up hearing the stir.

"What," he said to Vagn, "does it rain men to-night? But let it rain, so long as we dispose of them so quickly. Two dead, and an arm off a third,—and see what a prize you have

got, Vagn, Aki's son! That third man's arm bore a great ring of gold, and it slipped off when you smote off his hand, and now lies at your feet."

"Not so bad, Bui," said Vagn. "It is not every night in the year that even we Vikings of Jomsburg get a gold ring like this."

As he said this, he slipped the ring over his own hand, and bore it on his arm. Then he went to the front of the house to tell Sigvald what had happened.

All this time—what had become of Ogmund? He did not run far when he felt his hand was off; and, taking advantage of the confusion caused by the leap of his men, he turned back and lay in a ditch close by the gable of the house, and overheard what passed between Vagn and Bui.

All the time he was hard at work tying a bandage of linen, which he had torn from his shirt, tight round the stump of his wrist to staunch the blood.

Then he lay a little longer in the ditch, and stole away into the wood, which came close down to the town, and muttered as he went—

"Vagn, Aki's son, and Bui, and Jomsburg Vikings! These are, indeed, tidings to bear to Earl Hacon."

He had not gone far in the wood before he came to the house of a free-man whom he knew; He and his wife who knew leechcraft, as almost all the women of olden time did, bound up his gory stump, and put him across the fjord in a boat, and so from house to house and boat to boat, Ogmund the White sped on his way to Earl Hacon's grange.

CHAPTER XVI.

BEORN AND VAGN LOOK THORKELL UP.

WHILE Ogmund the White was listening to the Vikings, binding up his arm, and making his escape, matters within the hall soon came to their inevitable end. Half-smothered with smoke, and with hair already singed by the half-kindled shingles which fell in showers through the rafters, the Norwegians in the loft called down the trap-door that they prayed for peace, and would yield without further resistance if their lives were spared. This message was borne to Sigvald; and the men who brought it added, "The fire seeks them hard and fast, Captain, and, if you do not grant them peace at once, there will be none of them left to take it."

"I will speak with them myself," said Sigvald, to whom Vagn had just reported what had passed under the gable.

He was soon in the hall, which itself was blazing in one corner and filled with stifling wreaths of smoke, and called up through the trap—

"Whose men are ye that ask now for peace after doing us so much scathe?"

"We be Ogmund's men, and Ogmund is liegeman of Earl Hacon, and was our leader; but who be ye?"

"No matter who we be," said Sigvald, sternly. "The question now is whether ye shall have peace and your lives, though ye scarce deserve it. Where now is your leader, Ogmund?"

"That you can tell better than we," was the answer. "A while ago, Ogmund the White leapt out of the gable-window, and two of us with him. What became of them we know well, for we saw their heads spin off, and their trunks fall flat; but Ogmund the White ran off through the smoke and flame, and, if ye know naught of him, he is now safe in the wood."

"Bore he a good gold ring on his arm when he leapt out?" asked Sigvald.

"He did."

"Then, though his body has got clean off, he left his hand and ring behind him for one of our company." Then he went on, "But the rest of you pray for peace? Well! ye shall have it, for ye have held out like good men and true; and ye shall keep your arms and clothes, and all the goods ye have about you, but naught else. All the rest is spoil of war, and belongs to us."

"Thanks, noble Captain," cried the spokesman of the Norwegians; "and now let us shove down the ladder, and get out of this oven as soon as may be, for we be all singed and scorched and nigh stifled with smoke."

"Come down as soon as you like," said Sigvald.

Then down crawled some twenty miserable men, who could scarce utter a word much less lift a hand as they passed through the file of Vikings, which opened out on either side to let them escape.

Burning with thirst, they made for the river, and soon slaked their parched tongues in its cool stream.

As for the Vikings, they went on searching

the rest of the houses for spoil, but they found no man, woman, or child. Every human being had fled, availing themselves of the breathing time gained for them by the bravery of Ogmund and his men.

When all the spoil had been brought together, the Vikings lay down to sleep, scattered up and down in the houses which the flames had spared. Some, however, were set to guard the sleepers and the spoil, and thus Tunsberg, which on the eve of that November night stood flourishing by the river side in peace and plenty, lay the next morning in dust and ashes, and over the ruins of its houses rose wreaths of smoke, and fitful tongues of flame as the charred beams and rafters fell down upon the smouldering mass and provoked a fresh outburst of fire.

Next morning, according to the invariable law of the company, all the spoil was brought to the pole or spear, or, as we should say, to the hammer. It was sold for the common good, and the money which it fetched was divided in certain proportions among the whole band.

We have already described this custom on

the occasion of Atli's killing and the capture of his ships by Beorn and Vagn on their autumn cruize. We only mention it, therefore, and pass on.

After the spoil had been thus sold and divided, the Captain gave orders that the fleet should rest one day to refit before it proceeded to harry the Norwegian coast till they could find out where Earl Hacon was, then to fall on him, and bring their quarrel to a final issue.

This delay was not at all to Beorn's mind. Why give the enemy any rest? Did he not need it at least as much as they? This, old Palnatoki would never have done,—he would have pushed on and taken no rest till he had put his enemy under his feet.

This and much else beside, the old grumbler did not utter openly, but secretly into Vagn's ear, who had to bear with them as well as he could.

At last, bearing it no longer, he said—

"Well, Beorn, if you are against taking rest to-day, what say you to coming with me on a deed of 'derring-do.'"

"Say the word, boy, and I'm your man," growled the old Viking; "I'm for anything but rest. I shall have rest enough when I am dead."

"But promise to come."

"That is like buying a pig in a poke," said Beorn; "but for all that I give my word and there's my hand on it too. Out with it, what is it to be?"

"To look up Thorkell at his grange at Leira, close by, and kill him if we can, and carry off Ingibeorg, and so accomplish my vow at least before the Captain or any of the band."

"Whew!" said Beorn, with something like a prolonged whistle. "Whew, that is an adventure of which even your grandsire might have been proud. But can we do it, boy, we two, with our two ships? Thorkell is a mighty chief, and we shall not catch him napping as we caught Ogmund the White last night."

"My answer comes out of your own quiver, Beorn," said Vagn. "'Nothing venture, nothing have.' If we cannot surprise them and carry off Ingibeorg, with our two ships, manned each

by one hundred and twenty brave fellows, we shall not do it with five, or ten, or twenty."

"Let us be off then as soon and as quietly as we can," said Beorn. "It's against the law you know, but somehow or other, all my life I have found it so much pleasanter to break the law than to keep it. We will say we are just going out to try our new sails. Trust me, we shall be forgiven to-morrow, when we come back with Thorkell's head and his fair daughter."

So the two captains quietly slipped their moorings and fell down the river as slowly and lazily as though they were only about to shift their berths. But as soon as they reached the bay they hoisted sail and made for the river, on which Leira stood, using their oars as well to speed them on their way.

They were not long in making the mouth of that river; it was but twenty miles off, and their design was masked by a slight sea-fog, which rendered objects indistinct, though it was not thick enough to hinder navigation.

It was still daylight when they reached the mouth of the river, and there, in a little creek,

they ran up their ships and waited for nightfall.

As soon as it grew dark they rowed up in one ship, leaving the other in the creek, but taking fifty of her crew on board with them. Slowly and stealthily, they neared the grange, which both Vagn and Beorn knew, as we have heard, of old.

"Find it!" said Beorn when Vagn showed some doubt of their finding the spot,—"I could find my way thither in the blackest night or thickest fog that ever fell on these waters."

And now there were the lights glimmering through the window slits in Thorkell's hall; and there, in that building, in her bower, was Ingibeorg the Fair, the idol of Vagn's heart. How high that heart beat as he gazed on the spot, it is granted only to young and ardent lovers to know.

It may seem to many fathers-in-law, and it may be to just as many mothers-in-law, a strange thing, that a lover of the tenth century should plan the death of the father of the maiden with whom he was in love, and we

hope there are no young ladies of the present age who would think of marrying a man who had killed their father. But then, as we have seen, the tenth century was a hard and cruel age, so hard that it was sometimes necessary to kill your father-in-law, or rather, your intended father-in-law, before you could gain your bride's hand. No doubt Vagn would have been quite ready to spare Thorkell this painful process, but so long as Thorkell lived he would never have consented; nay, he would have been the first to kill Vagn if he could, and so if Vagn really kills him in these pages, it must be understood that he does it in self defence, and because the deed is forced on him. After this defence of one of the most lovable of our characters, let us get on with our story.

There was the grange, and there were the lights; it was now pitch dark, not a soul was stirring out of doors, and all was favourable for their undertaking. Leaving twenty men to take care of their long-ship, the rest landed, one hundred and fifty of them, from a gangway which they had thrown out from the ship's side to the shore; for the course of that Norwegian

river was sluggish, and its water deep twenty feet from shore.

And now these hundred and fifty, armed to the teeth, pass along the gangway and stand on the shore. Thence in close order they march up to the grange, uttering no word; and now they near the hall and seize both the doors, and now they think they have got Thorkell in a cleft-stick shut up in his hall, and that he must yield or die, just as Ogmund's men had to yield the night before.

All was still as death, when Beorn at one door and Vagn at the other broke the silence by giving each a great knock on the panel.

It was not long before a thrall answered each door with the usual question—

"What men are ye and whom do ye seek?"

"We are our own men," said Vagn, "and we seek Thorkell of Leira."

"He is not here," answered the thrall. "It was but last night that he sailed across the Bay with his five ships to a wedding at the King's Crag."

"Whom took he with him?" asked Vagn, eagerly.

"Oh!" said the thrall, "he took all his fighting men and the young mistress, Ingibeorg the Fair, and left none behind save his 'house-carles and thralls.'"

"Let us in," said Vagn in vexation, "that we may ransack the house and learn if you speak the truth."

"As to that," was the reply, "I must take counsel of others wiser than myself. Meanwhile, do you stay where you are."

As he said this, he turned from the door and left Vagn and his men out in the dark.

Much the same answer was given to Beorn at his door; and, while the thralls asked counsel within doors, Beorn and Vagn met and talked the matter over without.

"Here is a pretty business, foster-child," said the veteran. "Both birds escaped, and naught but spoil, no fame to be had. The ancient gods surely shield Thorkell; after all, it is good to worship them."

"I think chance and luck has just as much

to do with it as the ancient gods, but what shall we do, foster-father?"

"Take all the spoil we can, boy, and then just go back by the way which we came. It would serve Thorkell right if we burned his house."

"Nay! nay! we will not do that," cried Vagn. "I would not, that Ingibeorg the Fair should return and find her bower a heap of ashes. Let us spoil the house, but leave it standing."

"See now what a thing this love is, and what a hateful thing too," said Beorn; "when just as a man has a good chance of damaging his enemy, it steps between him and his revenge and says, 'Don't burn his house down, for I love his daughter.' 'Twas not so in old time."

"But it shall be so in this," said Vagn, violently. "Foster-father, do you know I could fight thee to the death on this quarrel."

"Fight me, boy!" said Beorn with a grin, "then you might chance to get the worse of it, as other boys before you;" and then he went on, "but never fear, I'll not fight with you on this or any other quarrel; but whatever we do,

let us be quick about it, for the Captain's orders are to sail to-morrow and we must be back betimes."

Just then the thralls came back each to his door, and he that held Vagn's door, asked, "Bergthora, our housekeeper, wants to know if ye will spare our lives if we let you in, and not spoil Thorkell's goods."

"Spare your lives we will, thrall," said Vagn; "but as for not spoiling Thorkell's goods, we came here to kill him and spoil his goods. We have missed him, but here are his goods and his house. Go back and tell Bergthora that unless she lets us in at once, we will raise a pile of wood before each door and light it, and then no man or woman shall come out alive."

Bearing this message the thrall soon came back and unbarred the outer gate, and threw up the folding doors which let into the hall.

As Vagn and Beorn strode into it, followed by their men, they saw the boards spread for supper, and the brose and meat on them; but all the household, numbering about thirty souls in all, were huddled together round

Bergthora on the dais at the other end of the hall.

"Just in time for supper, boy," said Beorn to Vagn. "This is the way we begin to spoil Thorkell's goods."

While Beorn sat down to eat, Vagn went up to the dais and called out—

"Where is Bergthora, the housekeeper? I would speak with her."

"Here I am," said a gaunt, sturdy woman. "I would that Thorkell were here to give you the welcome you deserve."

"If great chiefs will go to weddings," said Vagn, "they cannot stay at home, either to meet their friends or their foes. But is there never a man left to talk with, and is it you, indeed, who rule the roast here, Bergthora?"

"I am mistress in this house when Thorkell is away and my foster-child Ingibeorg, though I am but a thrall; but Thorkell trusts all to me, and you may be sure, if I rule the roast, I would serve it up scalding hot to such robbers as you if I could have my way."

"I did not come hither to bandy words with women," said Vagn; "but to say that we

would treat you and all the household gently. But as we are robbers, as you say, though Thorkell, too, has been a robber in his time, and thinks it no sin to spoil his foe's goods, so now it is our turn to spoil his goods. All, then, that is movable in this house, is ours by right of war; and if we take these, and you will show us where they are, we will spare both your lives, and the house, and the cattle."

"I am Thorkell's thrall," said Bergthora, proudly; "but I am no traitor. As for his goods, as you say they are yours by the right of the strongest, seek, then, for them, and carry off what you can find; but do not think that I will show you where to find them."

"There are some in this company who stand at my back," said Vagn, "who would not scruple to torture you to reveal where Thorkell's precious things lie hidden. There have been Vikings who bound women hand and foot, laid them before a slow fire, or who hung them up, with one foot resting on a spike, while the other could not touch the earth."

"I know all that," said Bergthora, "and I

know that women have borne all this, and yet never betrayed their trust. Do what you please, but never think that Bergthora will be faithless to Thorkell, when he put the keys of his house into her hands, and made her mistress over all and everything."

From this it will be seen that Bergthora's character was like her form, stiff and sturdy. Vagn felt that he was getting the worst of the discussion, and was grateful when Beorn roared at him from the middle of the hall—

"Boy, boy! come to supper! The boards smoke, and we wait for you! We cannot starve to death while you make love to Thorkell's housekeeper!"

This speech was greeted with a roar of applause from the rest of the band, who were greatly tickled by the notion that their handsome captain could be taken by the charms of a hag so old and ugly as Bergthora.

Slowly and sadly Vagn paced down the hall, took his place on the high seat opposite to Beorn, and devoured in silence the supper which was served by Thorkell's thralls. After the boards were cleared, casks of mead and ale

were broached; and, as the liquor was good, the rank and file of the Vikings would have been well content to have caroused through the winter night; but such prolonged revelry was no part of the plan of their captains. The annals of the North could tell of many instances where the owner of a house, thus surprised, returned suddenly himself, and caught his unwelcome guests, when heavy with sleep and wine, in the house which they had seized, and then made short work of them. As soon, therefore, as one horn had gone round "To the Vikings of Jomsburg," and thus revealed to Bergthora the true character of these unwelcome guests, Beorn bade the thrall who played the part of cupbearer —for Bergthora sturdily refused to bear it round herself—to fill it once again to the brim; "For," he said, "I have a toast to drink." Then, as he raised it to his lips, he cried—

"I drain this horn to the good health of Thorkell of Leira, who has brewed this stinging ale for our supper."

After the shouts which followed this toast had ceased, Vagn rose in his highseat, and said—

"I, too, sitting here in the high-seat of my foeman, Thorkell of Leira, have a toast to drink, and this is it: 'I, Vagn, Aki's son, drain this horn to the health of Ingibeorg the Fair, Thorkell's daughter; and, as I drain it, I repeat my vow that I will kill Thorkell and wed his daughter before I leave this land of Norway, or else lay my bones in it."

Renewed shouts followed this repetition of Vagn's vow when sitting in the high-seat of the chief whom he had vowed to slay.

"Well done! well drunk, boy!" said Beorn; "and now to business. Pleasure comes first, and business follows after. We have eaten and drunk. Now let us spoil Thorkell's goods."

"That, methinks, will not be so easy," said Vagn. "Bergthora alone has the keys, and those she will not give up; nor will she say where aught of price is. She is Ingibeorg's foster-mother; and I will not have her tortured or plagued to reveal her secrets."

"There, again," muttered Beorn, "is another evil of love. Because Vagn is in love with a girl, he will not have her foster-mother

tortured! Who ever heard of such nonsense? Why I remember hanging an old Irish woman up by the heels over a fire to make her confess where her husband's treasure was. It is quite true that she confessed nothing, but died choked by the smoke. Still we did it, and it might be done here but for this silly love."

"Take the keys away from the old hag by force," cried one of the Vikings. "Throw her into the fire," said another. Beorn was eager for force, and Vagn was as obstinately set against it. It might have ended in a free fight between the Vikings in the hall, had not an end been unexpectedly put to the dispute. The rest of the women of the household, in terror at the threatening gestures of the Vikings, gathered in a knot round the sturdy Bergthora, overpowered her, took her keys from her, and then the youngest ran down the hall, and handed them to Vagn.

"Here are the keys, noble captain; and you can now open Thorkell's chests, which are in the safe outside the women's door. As for us, what will become of us when Thorkell returns, and Bergthora is again mistress, none

of us can tell; but we thought it better that you should have the keys, and work your will, than that you should burn the house over our heads, and perhaps cut our throats."

Having said this, she darted up the hall again like a bird; and then the whole body of women surrounded Bergthora, who was seen protesting tooth and nail against their conduct, and hurried her off through the women's door to Ingibeorg's bower; where they, no doubt, considered themselves safe, after Vagn's avowal of love for their young mistress.

"Glad they are gone, provoking things," said Beorn; "but here are the keys, and yonder is the safe that young hussey pointed out. Let us open Thorkell's chests, Vagn, and spoil his goods, and then be off to our ships: the night wears on apace."

In a few minutes the chests were unlocked, and all Thorkell's costly chattels were strewn on the floor. There were rich stuffs from the East,—gold and silver brocade, sammyt, and bawdekyn, and pell,—every piece a treasure in itself, and the fruit of Thorkell's Viking voyages on the East Sea. There, too, was

goodly store of amber from the Livonian shores, staves scored with runes as rude calendars of the times and seasons of the year, silver cups and stoups of strange shape, Mazer bowls of maple and other rare woods mounted in silver and gold, massive rings in silver and gold, brooches and bracelets. As chest after chest revealed its treasures, Beorn's eyes glistened, and at last he cried—

"Yon old hag did well to be stiff-fingered in clutching the keys which open such golden stores. I have not seen such weight of gold. No; not since Palnatoki and I sacked the Erse King's hall at Tara!"

"All this," thought Vagn, "was Ingibeorg's dower; and these costly stuffs which would have made robes for her fair form, must now be sold under the spear, and divided among rude Vikings."

"You seem sad, boy," said Beorn. "'Tis not often that Vikings come across such spoil without stroke of sword. Even though we spare Thorkell's house, and leave his cattle and stock unslain, and his ale and mead unbroached, we shall carry off more spoil in this one

night than often falls to our lot in one year."

"I am sad," said Vagn aside to his comrade; "for all this would one day be Ingibeorg's, and now I rob her of it when I spoil her father's house."

"This love, boy," cried Beorn, stamping his foot with rage, "is enough to drive a man mad. What should a Viking do but spoil his enemy, and share his goods among the band. It is the law, and you must obey it, or leave the band. But this passion makes you fit for nothing. Here, men, throw all this spoil into the chests again, and carry them down to our ship. It is time we said good-bye to Thorkell's grange, and were out of the river again. There is nothing like sea-room for me."

To make a long story short, the chests were borne down to the shore, and stowed on board the long-ship. Then Vagn and Beorn left the hall, and as they passed out of the door, Bergthora and her maids entered it by the other end, only to wring her hands as she passed the safe, now empty of Thorkell's chests. As the

two chiefs descended the slope on which the house stood to the beach, they could see the outline of her form standing out in the red light of the fire which shot through the doorway, and they could see that she shook her fist at them as they went.

"There, at least, stands one faithful servant," said Vagn.

"Aye, aye!" said Beorn; "a fine time those maids will have of it when Thorkell comes home, and Bergthora tells him how they took her keys from her."

Thus they reached the ship, dropped down the narrow, sluggish stream, shot out into the open Fjord, and rowed, with the wind dead against them, those twenty miles which lay between them and the Tunsberg river. Midway they saw the sails of Thorkell's five ships running before the wind across the bay, as he and his daughter returned from the wedding, only to find their home sacked in the meanwhile. It might have been awkward even for the tried warriors of Beorn and Vagn to have fought those five ships in that narrow river, or on the open sea. As it was, they were well

quit of such a struggle, and returned from their adventure in time to proceed with the rest of the fleet along the Norwegian coast, though their absence had been a cause of wonder to Sigvald and his captains.

CHAPTER XVII.

HOW THE NEWS CAME TO EARL HACON.

We have seen how Ogmund the White had been passed on from farm to farm on his way to Earl Hacon. Six weary days and nights he spent, never resting till he heard where the Earl was, at a grange called Skuggi, near to the modern town of Bergen, in South Mæren, north of Stad, where he was at a feast, made for him by one of his liegemen called Erling. There he sat at meat in Erling's high seat, with Earl Eric his son, and one hundred of his body-guard.

The feast was like others which we have so often described. The food was ample, and the mead and meat good. Erling was the most liberal and careful of hosts, and did his best to entertain the Earl; but on that night Hacon's handsome face was dark and lowering, for he had consulted the gods as to the length of his

reign, and though he had made sacrifice after sacrifice, they had not deigned to give him any answer by any of the usual signs and tokens which revealed their will.

"'Tis a gloomy wintry night, Eric," said his father. "Pray the gods we may soon have snow and frost. This misty lowering sky betokens no favour from the heavens for us."

"'Tis ever so in November, father," said Eric. "What says the proverb, 'Seven winters and yet no winter.' Meaning that before the real winter comes, with its constant frost and snow, seven frosts and seven thaws precede it. We are still in the seven-winter tide. Before Yule we shall have frost enough."

"But the gods are angry, I am sure," said the Earl, "angry at that impious deed of Rapp, when he burnt down the temple in Gudbrandsdale. I sacrifice, and they will not answer, but hide themselves from my prayers."

"All will go well, father," said Eric; "perhaps the gods are angry at the rapid progress of the new faith in other lands; but they cannot be angry with you, who are so constant in your sacrifices."

"I know not how it is, son," said the Earl, "but I feel as though the gods were angry; as if some evil were about to befall me."

"And I," said Eric, in all the fulness of his beauty and his strength, "feel as though the heavens smiled on me, and as if our rule would never be overthrown in Norway."

"It may be so," said the Earl, "but I doubt it."

After this the Earl fell back in his seat, lost in thought, and scarce noticing the cup-bearer, who brought him the horn as the feast went on.

At last Eric, who sat at his right hand, said again—

"See, father, a stranger enters the hall, with hooded head. May be he brings news from the East country?"

"Let him approach and stand before us," said the Earl, still in the same melancholy mood.

Up the hall the stranger strode, his head still hooded, a token that he wished for a time at least to remain unknown.

When he came before the Earl he bowed low and said—

"Hail, lord."

"Welcome to this hall, and to its good cheer," said the Earl. "Before you sit down to drink, tell us if you bear us any news."

"The tidings I bring," said the stranger, "are not very great, except to me, but still some people might think them great, for they may well become greater."

"What tidings?" asked the Earl sharply.

"These," said the stranger, "that a great host has landed East in the Bay; these war-tidings I bring, and more that they have begun with the greatest strife and bloodshed, and I ween they will go on as they have begun."

"I am sure I don't know," said the Earl, "that men will ever cease their lies here in the land, until some of them are hanged for them."

All the answer that the stranger made to this sharp speech was to throw back his hood, and then Earl Eric at once took up his tale.

"Not so, father, not so, for I know the man. This is no liar, but one of your own liegemen under me away east in the Bay."

"If you know so much about the man, Eric,"

said the Earl, "and will vouch for him, pray tell us who he is."

"I know all about him," said Eric. "This is Ogmund the White, your liegeman, under me in my Earldom in the Bay. Many a time and oft has he made me better cheer than we make for him now."

"I did not know him," said the Earl, "and I scarce know him now, except by name; but let him stand close to me while I question him."

So Ogmund stood close to the Earl, and the first words Hacon said were these—

"Tell me now which of all the Ogmunds art thou?"

"Ogmund the White, the son of Aslak, in the Bay," said the stranger.

"Well, I know Aslak, in the Bay," said the Earl, "he stood by me in King Harold's time, when we held the Dannevirk against the Germans, and their Emperor, Otho. And now I call to mind that Eric here, a year or two back, begged me to make Aslak's son my liegeman, away in the East. And so thou art the man!"

"The same, lord."

"The pip of a good apple has good apples in it," said the Earl, "and so Aslak's son must be trusty and true. But tell me now, this great host of which you speak, by whom is it led?"

"The leader's name is Sigvald," said Ogmund, "and under him I heard tell of Bui and Vagn."

"Sigvald, Bui, Vagn!" exclaimed the Earl. "These be great names, indeed. Then the Vikings of Jomsburg have landed in the Bay, and grey wolves and yellow-footed kites will have a fine feast carved for them. But before I believe this, Ogmund the White, I must have better proof than mere words."

"One more proof I can give thee, lord," said Ogmund, "and if that is not enough, seek it elsewhither. This!"

With these words he held up the stump of his left arm; and then he added, "When I parted with the Vikings I parted with my hand at the elbow."

"This is a good proof," cried the Earl, "bone and blood are better than words and wind. Thou hast had a sore loss, but it was well thou didst not lose thy life. Tell us, knowest thou

the name of the man who dealt you the blow?"

"I do not know, but I can guess," said Ogmund, "for some one said, as he that smote off my hand stooped to pick up the ring which fell off my arm at the stroke, 'That was a gainful blow, Vagn, Aki's son!' Then I guessed it must have been Vagn who hurt me, and that the Vikings of Jomsburg must be loose in the land."

"It must be all true," said the Earl, "and your words are those of a good man and true. But of all the hosts in the North this is the one I should least like to deal with; and now we shall need all our wit and hardihood to cope with these new comers. How true my feeling was that the gods were angry, and that ill-luck was coming on the land."

"Not so, father, not so," said Eric. "Say rather that Odin is anxious to fill some of the empty seats in Valhalla with stout champions. He has brought this brave host into the land that the Valkyries may have good choice of slain warriors to bid to his feast. Whatever befalls either us or these Vikings, be sure that

Odin's hall will be strengthened on the eve of the battle with mighty warriors who will fall on either side."

"True enough, boy," said the Earl, "and it glads my heart to hear thee speak like one of Ragnar's royal race; but my care now must be to throw the loss of men as much as we can from ourselves, and on the Vikings."

Then turning to Ogmund, who still stood before him, he said—

"Two words more, liegeman, ere thou sittest down to meat and mead. How long was it since thou partedst with the Vikings; and how many ships thinkest thou brought them into the land?"

"'Tis six nights since I saw the Vikings, lord," said Ogmund; "and, as for their ships, I could not count them in the dark, but they were a great company, and the land swarmed with armed men."

"They would not come thus late in the year, unless it were with some deep purpose," said the Earl. "This is no sudden raid to harry a province, or to seize a ness and slaughter cattle for their winter store, and then depart.

No! it is a host that comes in all its might, to try its strength with us, and to pull us down if it can. And so it is six nights since they parted from Ogmund? Then they must be well on their way to meet us. No time is to be lost, Eric. The arrow of war must fly abroad with to-morrow's dawn; and you and I, and Sweyn your brother, and all our good men and true, must scour the land. Norway will rise at our bidding to hurl back these Vikings who, trusting in themselves alone, and not in the ancient gods, have dared to come hither to measure swords with us and our people."

Having said this, the Earl sunk back in his high seat, while the mead went round, nor did any one drain it more deeply than Ogmund the White, whose name was that night lengthened, as it was called. From that day forth, he was no longer known as "the White," but as "Stump-Ogmund;" as the man whose hand, Vagn, Aki's son, had smitten off, and who yet in six nights' space brought the tidings to Earl Hacon, that the Vikings of Jomsburg had fallen on the land with fire and sword.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE ARROW OF WAR.

NEXT morning all in Erlings grange at Skuggi were up and stirring in the gray dawn. Long before the morning meal, the Earl had sent out messengers on horseback up the dales and across the fjords in boats bearing the arrow of war from house to house. The readers of Scott's "Marmion" will remember the fiery cross which called the Scots to battle: just so was the arrow of war in Norway;—wherever it came, the owner of the farm was bound to rise with all the able-bodied men about him, whether free or thrall, and to repair to the place of meeting in arms, there to await the Earl's bidding. The penalty for disobedience was the burning of his house over his head: hanging on the nearest tree if he broke out and escaped the flames. But it is not recorded that this penalty was ever paid. Those were

the days when every man was ready to rise in defence of his country. The place of meeting for all the ships that could be mustered was the island of Hod, not far from Skuggi, where the Earl then was. As soon as his messengers with the arrows had been sent off in all directions, the Earl sent the chivalrous Eric to his second son Sweyn, who was at his grange near the modern Drontheim, then called Hladir, or the Barns, for there was no city there then, and Drontheim, or more properly Thrandheim, was the name of a great district, consisting of four tribes or districts, the unruly freemen of which looked on themselves as the heart and centre of the whole kingdom, and to whose support Earl Hacon, or "the Barn Earl," as he was called from his grange at Hladir, was indebted for his sovereignty over Norway. As the peril was great, so not a man who could wield sword or bend bow was to fail, and every ship that was of any size or at all seaworthy was to be manned and sent to the muster.

As the coast south of Stad, the great headland, was unsafe from the approach of the

Vikings, the main force of the Earl in ships was looked for from the North; but men might come from the South across the Fells, and down the Dales; and in many a southern fjord lay good ships in snug creeks, which, before the foe passed along the shore, might slip out, and, doubling Stad, that promontory which every ship must pass, join the muster and swell the Norwegian host. To warn these his liegemen, Earl Hacon sent his host Erling; and his message was that any man who neglected to send ship, or failed to come himself, should only do so at the peril of his head.

As the distance from Bergen to Drontheim was not so very far, Eric was soon again at his father's side, leaving his brother Sweyn behind to hasten the levies from the North. But at such a time there was work for every one to do; and Earl Hacon was not the man to keep Eric idle, nor was Eric the man to waste his time. To him was now confided a more delicate mission.

Earl Hacon had not reigned so long without making enemies. Those were times when it was so easy to do wrong in a ruler's eyes, and

to think all the while one was doing right. Those early sovereignties were all more or less tyrannies, and to a strong ruler many things were forgiven in which he had offended against this or that freeman, if, on the whole, his rule were peaceful and just. In every country, therefore, there were outlaws, men of good birth and broad lands, who had broken what was called the lord's peace, and had been laid under his ban. This had not paid him his dues; this had slain one of the lord's men, or the lord's men had slain one of the freeman's friends and not made atonement, or, offering it, the lord had refused to have "the spear bought off," as it was called, and so they had been at feud. Thus all over Norway there were outlaws, hiding in the woods and on hills, or lurking as Vikings and robbers in the fjords, and wasting the coasts. Their hand was against every man, and every man's hand against them. But these outlaws were almost in every case good warriors, part, and the main part, of the bone and muscle of the land. In peace the Earl might care little for their help, but in war, and in war like this that was coming on him, it was

a great thing to win them back; and so Eric's second mission was to bear his greeting to all who were at feud with him, and to say, that, in spite of their misdeeds, he was ready to take them into his peace again, and to let bygones be bygones, if they would flock to his banner, and hold the land against the Jomsburgers.

The young and fair and strong and noble Eric was just the man to fulfil this perilous task. North and South, East and West, to all parts he went patching up old quarrels, and setting these unruly outlaws at one with his stern father.

So it was that, after going North to Naumdale on this business, as he was sailing through Hammer Sound, Eric saw war-ships before him, and the captain of those ships was one Thorkell, hight "Midlong" or "Longwaist," a red-handed Viking, who was at feud with the Earl. As soon as the Vikings saw the Earl's men before them, they got out their arms, and were just in the act of rowing up to charge them.

As soon as Eric saw that, says the Saga, he called out to Thorkell—

"If thou wilt fight with us, we are quite ready, but still I see something much better."

"What is that?" asked Thorkell.

"Methinks it is an unnatural thing," said Eric, "that we men of Norway should fall to blows among ourselves, for now there is something far better to be done, and that is to come and join my father with your men, and if you will only stand by him as you are able to do, then ye two may be set at one again, and you will find it no hard thing to come to terms with him."

But Thorkell answers—

"I will choose what you say if you will give me your word that it shall be all plain sailing, as you say, when I and your father meet."

"I will take care of that, never fear," said Eric; and so Thorkell Longwaist turned with all his force to help Eric and his company.

So day after day went on, and still there was no news of the Vikings, that is to say, no news of their near approach. But every day only made it still more certain that they had come with serious purpose into the land; for each day came freemen from the East and South,

whose farms had been wasted, their cattle seized, and their goods spoilt, as the great Viking host slowly made its way North. No doubt it would have been better had they struck across the Cattegat strait for the Naze, or, as the Norwegians called it, Lidandisness, without yielding to the temptation of turning aside into the Bay. That step gave them more spoil, but it afforded the Earl more time to make ready to receive them. While they lingered along the coast, the arrow of war had done its work; and, in the few days thus lost, Earl Hacon had gathered to his banner no less than three hundred ships, a number which was twice as great as that of the Viking fleet. But then they were, very many of them, half the size of the war-snakes of Jomsburg and King Sweyn, for theirs, it will be remembered, were all picked ships.

The place of muster for the Earl's men and ships was, as we have said, at an island called Hod, off the coast of South Mæren; and there the Earl stayed with his four sons, the two elder of whom were Sweyn and Eric, surrounded by his liegemen and stewards

and body-guard; while the fleet of the freemen clustered round the war-ships of their ruler, awaited impatiently the coming of the foe against whom they had now made all the preparations in their power. In number of ships, as well as of men, the Norwegians were far superior to the foe; but whereas the Viking ships were all tall-sided, high-bulwarked vessels, those of the Norwegians were, for the most part, trading ships and galleys, two of which were no match for the war-snakes of that renowned band. The Vikings, too, were all beaten blades, with sinews nerved and frames scarred by constant warfare. Their antagonists were, on the contrary, for the most part, raw recruits; and, though in those days every freeman was trained to arms, many of them, in all likelihood, had never been engaged in battle before. Still, their hearts were true as steel, and they burned to put the mettle of the invaders to the proof. Above all things, they reckoned on the luck and policy of their crafty ruler. The man who had surmounted so many trials, and had won his way to the sovereignty of the land, was not likely to be

unfortunate this time. He was the favourite of those ancient gods who had hitherto so manifestly befriended him, and whose sacrifices he had so religiously maintained. They felt sure, therefore, that he would win the day. Earl Hacon, too, was confident in the help of Heaven; but he, too, with all his host, felt that this was the turning point in his career, and that, if he did not defeat the Vikings, there would be an end of him and of his dynasty in Norway.

CHAPTER XIX.

SIGMUND THE PEERLESS RETURNS TO NORWAY.

WHILE the Earl and his men lay thus waiting, the warders who kept watch on the isthmus which joins the headland Stad to the shore, were aware of a long-ship coming up from the South under all sail, and they lost no time in reporting her to the Earl at Hod.

"A single ship," said the Earl, "must be a friend. No one vessel of the Viking's would thus run into the bear's hug. 'Tis one of our guests or liegemen coming back from a quest."

In a few hours the words of the Earl proved true: the long-ship was seen rounding the headland, and then making for the gathering. As the Earl sat at meat that night her captain strode into the hall, and all were glad in this hour of need to welcome back Sigmund the Peerless, the son of Brestir. As he passed

along the hall, all eyes were turned on him, and the Earl in joy called out—

"Hither, Sigmund! come and sit by my side, and tell me how thou hast fared since we last parted."

"Well, lord," said Sigmund.

"If well," said the Earl, "then thou hast brought me the head of Harold Ironskull, my enemy away in the West."

"I have brought it, lord," said Sigmund, "and more besides."

"I wished for no more than his head," said the Earl, grimly. "While he was here in Norway, his body and his hands brought little good. But, perhaps, thou meanest his goods."

"I have brought Harold's head and hands and ships and goods and all," said Sigmund.

"Good luck to your hands then, Sigmund, which have been able to tame such an outlaw; but tell us how it happened?"

"'Tis a long story," said Sigmund, as he drained a horn of mead, "and story-telling is dry work; but I will begin.

"When we parted not long ago in Gudbrandsdale, after Rapp burned the Temple, and you,

lord, got me this gold ring, you bade me go and bring you the head of Harold Ironskull, who was lurking in Orkney or about Scotland's Firths. 'Dear are a lord's words,' says the old saw. So we put to sea at once, and hoped to make Shetland, and so run through Dynrost to the Orkneys, and ask news of Harold from Earl Sigurd; but, though the wind was fair from the southward and east the day we started, we were no sooner clear of the land than it blew sharp from the northward, and drove us down past Jutland; and then it changed to north-east, and we had to run before it through the English Sea and the Straits till we were driven among the Scilly Isles. All this time we were cursing our luck, and thinking that in this way we should never bring you back the head of Ironskull. Well, the Monks at Scilly were better to us than many Northmen have been to them. They gave us water and meal, and in their haven, which they call St. Mary's, we laid up our ships and refitted them. They told us news also, lord, for they said that your foe Olaf, the son of Tryggvi, had lately been there."

"There!" said the Earl, with a start; "and

where is he now, that upstart who calls himself Tryggvi's son, and who worships the White Christ?"

"In Dublin, lord, with his namesake King Olaf; and before he came to Scilly he had warred in England with King Ethelred the Unready, and made him ransom his land and buy him off with sixteen hundred pounds' weight of gold."

"Any more about this Olaf?" said the Earl, gloomily.

"Yes," said Sigmund: "out of this gold he had given the Monks on Scilly one hundred pounds to make them a golden rood; and he had given them fifty more to be spent in masses for his soul when he dies; and forgive me if I go on to say he had promised them fifty more when he came to his own and was rightful King of Norway."

"Beggars use big words, Sigmund," said Earl Hacon, "and upstarts are ever boastful; but why seized you not all that gold, and why have you not brought it hither to me?"

"Because we were your liegemen and Guests out on a special quest, and not Vikings," said

Sigmund boldly; "and more, because the Monks had been good to us, and before they let us into their haven we had given our words to do them no harm."

"I have known such words broken on the salt brine. Sea-water washes out all words," said the Earl, with a sneer; "and so ye left the Monks in peace, and what else?"

"This," said Sigmund; "that when we left Scilly we ran for the Welsh Sea with a south-west wind, and as it was a snoring breeze we were not long before we ran into Anglesea Sound, steering for the Orkneys south instead of north about."

"And what saw ye in that Sound?" asked the Earl.

"It was dark when we made the Sound, so we cast anchor at the southern end, and at dawn next morning loosed and rowed through it; but when we got into the narrows we saw the Sound was blocked with ships, and as we neared them we could see eleven, ten small and one big war-drake."

"That war-drake must have had a brood of dragons," said the Earl.

"Not so," said Sigmund, with a smile; "they were not little drakes, but the dragon's spoil, the food on which the big drake lived."

"All the better for thee, Sigmund," said the Earl, "more spoil and less toil."

"As we rowed up, the small ships fell behind the big one, and she rowed to meet us; and when we came within hail I hailed her, and asked who steered her and what she did there?"

"And what was the answer?"

"The answer was a question," said Sigmund, "what I did there? and as for the captain, his name was Harold Ironskull."

"Harold Ironskull!" exclaimed the Earl. "Then after all, you see, the gods had heard my prayers, and Thorgerda Shrinebride lent thee luck when that ring slipped off her arm."

"Something led us, lord! whether it were Thorgerda Shrinebride or the White Christ; something led us, and when we were bewailing our luck and that sharp north wind that drove us through the English narrow seas, we were really making straight for him of whom we were in quest."

"I say, it was the ancient gods of this land

that led thee to my outlaw," said the Earl; "but go on with thy tale."

"It was at dawn of day," said Sigmund, "that we closed in fight, and all that day we fought, and neither had the mastery, for the war-drake was taller and higher than our ship out of the water, and manned with more men; but many fell on each side, and the scuppers of both ships ran blood."

"And what then?" asked the Earl, gloomily.

"Night parted us," said Sigmund; "for brave men fight ever by daylight, and all night we bound up our wounds and patched up our bulwarks, and next morning we were ready to cope with them again."

"This puts me in mind of the endless fight of the Hjatnings away in Hoy," said the Earl drily. "Life is not long enough for these lengthened struggles; all my battles I have ended in one day."

"May you end them all in one day, lord!" said Sigmund; "but this of ours could not be shorter!"

"Well," said the Earl hastily, "and what came of it after all?"

"Next morning, just as we were rowing up to them," said Sigmund, "Harold Ironskull stood up on the poop of his war-drake and called out: 'Are you going to fight us again?' to which I answered, 'Yes, and for ten days more if need be.'"

"That was bravely answered," said the Earl.

"Then he hailed us again," said Sigmund, "and said: 'Now I will say something that I have never yet said to any man,—I would become your brother in arms, and fight no longer, but be friends; for never yet met I such stout foemen.'"

"And what answer madest thou?" asked the Earl.

"I said, that was all very well, only one thing stood in the way; and Harold Ironskull bawled out and asked what it was. I said, Because Earl Hacon has sent me to fetch your head."

"That too was well said," burst out the Earl; "and what said he then?"

"He said what it was likely he would say," said Sigmund; "that he looked for naught but

evil at your hands; and then he went on and said something which truth forces me to tell, but which is quite untrue; he said, lord, that we two, you and I, were very unlike, for that I was the most dashing and daring of men, but that you were the worst of men."

"I forgive him that," said the Earl. "Beaten men will always prate; but I cannot even now see the end of it."

"The end of it was this," said Sigmund: "After Harold said, that his men and my men came between us, and asked why good men and true should cut one another's throats when they ought to be friends; and when men begin to talk, there is no fighting to be got out of them; and, truth to tell, we were all tired of fighting."

"Just as I said," said the Earl; "you should have had it out the first day, and rested on your victory the next."

"So, lord," Sigmund went on, "the end of it was that Harold Ironskull made peace, and he shared all the spoil in those eleven ships between my men and his men, and a tenth was set aside for you."

"That was well," said the Earl, who was greedy of gain, and whose eyes had glistened when he heard of the great store of gold that his foeman, Olaf, Tryggvi's son, had got in England. Then he went on: "But what became of Harold Ironskull?"

"I have brought him back with me," said Sigmund, "and in your name have granted him your peace, and his war-drake follows hard in my wake; but she is a slower sailer than mine."

"Harold Ironskull, my outlaw, here in Norway!" cried out the Earl. "And in my name thou hast granted him my peace, Sigmund? That can never be! Here, Eric, take three hundred men, and fall upon Harold and his men so soon as they touch the shore, and slay them all to a man."

"Not so, father," said Eric. "Two things are against it—one is, that no brave man ever slays another by night, and the other, you are bound by Sigmund's word."

"He *shall* be slain!" said the Earl. Then turning to Sigmund he said, while his face grew red as blood: "Oft hast thou done my bidding

better than this time, Sigmund. Why hast thou brought mine enemy hither and taken him into my peace?"

"Because, lord," said Sigmund, "I think a live man is better than a death's head. Besides, though I have not been here long, I know that just now the more good men and true you have about you the better. It was good luck to have fallen on Harold as we did, but better still, I think, to have brought him back alive. Besides, there were two stories as to bringing back his head. It was tugging a rope against a strong man, and I could not tell whether he would pull me instead of my pulling him down. And now, lord, I will make atonement to you for Harold, and pay any sum, even to the whole of my goods, if you will take him into thy peace. My word is pledged for his safety, for we are now brothers in arms."

"No," said the Earl, still red and angry; "I will not take him into my peace at any price."

"Then," said Sigmund, "I see that all the good service I have rendered thee is little worth, if I may not get peace and life for one

man. I will away from this land, nor serve thee longer; and I only wish that you may find it harder work than you think before you get Harold slain."

With these words, Sigmund sprung up from his seat, and strode out of the hall; while the Earl sat still and mute, and for a while no one dared to say a word. At last the Earl came to himself a little and said—

"Wroth just now was Sigmund the Peerless. Great scathe would it be to my realm if he left it thus. He can never be in earnest."

This gave the generous Eric time to put in a word.

"He was in earnest, father. Sigmund is ever in earnest when he speaks thus to a man's face; and let me say, what he said about gathering good men and true to you just now was quite true. When was Norway ever in greater need of all her brave sons than now; and in what does Harold Ironskull differ from Thorkell Longwaist here whom you have just taken into your peace? Both were outlaws, and both may now do Norway good service. It seems to me the worst counsel to fall on a

whole shipful of brave men and slay them, when by one gracious word you might gain another good ship, manned with a picked crew, to swell your fleet against the Vikings, who will be on you in a day or two."

It was plain that these words had weight with the Earl, though at first he would not seem to yield.

"I say naught about Harold Ironskull; but some of you run after Sigmund and fetch him back, and say I will speak to him."

At these words, Eric himself rose and sprang after Sigmund, whom he found moodily making for the shore.

"Come back, Sigmund," said the young Earl; "my father wishes to speak to thee."

"In an ill time have I done the Earl's bidding these several years," said Sigmund; "cutting off Beorn and Vandill, his enemies and outlaws in Sweden; and now, last of all, starting when the winter nights were hard at hand to slay his outlaw in those western waters on which a war-snake can scarce show her beak and live. Toil and battle and wild waves and stormy winds I have borne and

buffeted with to do his behests; and now, when I have as good as mastered his outlaw, and brought him alive into the land with great spoil for the Earl, he will not so much as grant me the man's life to whom I have pledged my word. I will go back to Faroe, and if on my way I fall in with Olaf, Tryggvi's son,—well! Earl Hacon and the ancient gods will have one follower less, and the upstart Olaf and his White Christ one more. That will be all."

"Not so, Sigmund," said Eric. "The bad fit has passed away from my father's mind, and he will listen to reason now. He sent me himself to call you back; for he feels, as we all feel, that Norway can ill spare you at such a pinch."

As he said this he laid his hand on Sigmund, and holding him by the gold ring which had once glistened on Thorgerda Shrinebride's arm, he gently led hm back to the hall.

There the Earl sat, still moody, but no longer red in face; and as he saw the two young men, who vied with one another in height and strength and beauty, he beckoned

them to him, and, when they stood before him, spoke as follows:

"The words of wrath are words of folly, Sigmund; and we have both had wrathful words. You threatened to leave Norway, and that was folly; for you are my liegeman and one of my body-guard, and at this time I could suffer none of my body-guard to leave the country. You might try to fly the land, but you know what the proverb says: 'Sharp are the King's ears, and he hears where he is not seen.' Though not King, I am Earl; and such an Earl as this land of Norway has never seen. No King's ears could be sharper, no King's arm longer and stronger than mine. You could not fly the land without my leave. At the same time, on second thoughts, I am ready to own that my words of wrath were also words of folly. This is no time for strife and bloodshed among the men of Norway, when the bravest warriors in all the North have fallen on the land like eagles on their prey. As I have, at the request of my son Eric, taken Thorkell Longwaist into my peace, with all his men; so at thine I am willing to say, Let bygones be by-

gones between me and Harold Ironskull, and to take him and his crew into my peace. I accept the tenth of the spoil as my due; and as for the price of the atonement to be paid by Harold to me, that I will fix for myself. I will not touch a penny of your money, or a yard of your goods. Go, therefore, and as soon as Harold Ironskull sets foot on shore, bring him to me. If he lays his head between my knees, he will not find me hard to deal with. But in this, as in all else, I must make all men feel that I, and no man else, am lord in Norway."

"Thanks, noble lord," said Sigmund. "It shall be done as you say. By the morning meal to-morrow look to see your outlaw, Harold Ironskull. He must ere this have doubled the headland, and will reach this island with the dawn."

"So said, so done," said Earl Hacon. "And now come and sit next to me, and drink in peace, and tell me more of your doings in the Western seas."

So they sat and drank, in Northern wise, till the night was far spent. Then they threw themselves on their beds, and slept out the

hours that were left. As Sigmund had foreseen, the dawn brought the heavy war-drake of Harold Ironskull to the shore. There, on the granite strand, he found Sigmund waiting to meet him with the news of his atonement with the Earl. Right glad was the old outlaw to hear it; and, before the morning meal, Earl Hacon had taken him and his crew into his peace, and Norway was stronger in the coming struggle by a gallant ship, a daring warrior, and 150 brave men.

It must be owned that Earl Hacon, if he were often cruel and wrathful, could be foresighted and politic when it suited his purpose.

CHAPTER XX.

EARL HACON CONSULTS THE GODS.

AFTER that morning meal, Earl Hacon was restless and uneasy. All wondered that he was so; for, as day came, fresh forces were added to his fleet; and even from the Bay, his furthest province in the East, chiefs and liegemen dropped in who had made their way up the dales and across the fells to join his banner. One of the latest of these new comers was an old acquaintance, Thorkell of Leira, to whose grange Beorn and Vagn had paid such an unruly visit. The Earl was out of doors talking to Sigmund when Thorkell and his men came up. They had ridden down the dale opposite to the island on which the Earl then was, and crossed over in boats; but their travel-worn and mire-stained garments showed how hard and with what haste they had ridden. Thorkell was a man far above the middle height

even in that land of tall men. Broad-shouldered and huge-fisted, though now waxing old, it was plain that he still possessed Herculean strength.

"Yonder comes the old Bear of the East, the Werebear of the Bay, as they call him down there. See a man after my own heart, Sigmund, who does not let everything grow in his eyes when it is set him to do."

Sigmund looked at him and said—

"A stout man and a tall; yet, nevertheless, he looks not like a lucky man."

"He has been lucky for all that," said the Earl. "But what knowest thou of luck, Sigmund? Canst thou see it on a man's face? Hast thou the second sight?"

"So it is said, away in the West, lord," said Sigmund. "The worst is, we can all tell whether another looks unlucky; but none of us can see good luck or bad luck on our own faces."

"So it ever is," said the Earl, gloomily. "We know others' fate better than our own. I see, as you see, ill luck on Thorkell's face; though he has hitherto been always lucky. Tell

me, now, what seest thou on my face—good or ill luck?"

"Good, lord," said Sigmund, gazing steadfastly at him; "and yet methinks there is a cloud behind the glory which I foresee coming on you."

"That, again, is only the lesson of life," said the Earl. "Every sun, the brightest, often will set in clouds. Enough for me is the glory that is coming on me. But see, here is Thorkell close at hand."

"What news from the Bay, liegeman?" he called out, cheerfully, to the warrior who stood before him.

"Bad is the best, lord," said Thorkell; "but I know you have heard the worst of it already from Ogmund, whom we met as we came along, coming from the Uplands after having his stump healed, at the house of his cousin, Thorhilda, the leech."

"Ogmund could not tell us all," said the Earl, "he had so soon to take leave of the Vikings. There must be more to tell from the Bay. What happened in your own district? Did they harry it, or pass on?"

"They did not harry it, and yet they did not pass on and over it; for that child of Hela, Vagn, Aki's son, and his foster-father, Beorn, paid me a visit while I was away at a wedding on the opposite coast. Would I had been there with these my men to make them welcome; but I was away, and so they had it all their own way."

Then Thorkell told the Earl the story of that visit, and how the Vikings, after the sack of Tunsberg, were making their way North, wasting the coast as they passed with fire and sword. He knew for certain, too, that they had 150 ships, tall and well manned, but that was all he had to say.

"Most of this we have heard before," said the Earl. "One thing is sure, that we shall outnumber them in ships. But turn aside into the grange, Thorkell, and eat and drink and rest after your journey. No man can tell how soon we may need all our strength."

So Thorkell and his company turned aside to eat and drink and rest, and the Earl still stood out of doors talking to Sigmund.

"Let us go back to what we spoke of, Sig-

mund," he said. "Dost thou remember that day when we stood in the temple in Gudbrand's Dale, when Thorgerda Shrinebride parted with her ring to you?"

"I remember it well," said Sigmund; "and if I did not, here is the ring on my arm to put me in mind of it."

"I told thee then that I felt heavy, as though something was coming on me; and lo! something, and that a great thing, has befallen me. Since then I have scarce had heart to inquire or to seek counsel of the Gods. Now that you have come back, and that things look brighter, have you a mind to go with me to the nearest temple, and to ask their will?"

"I do not believe in these Gods so much as you, lord," said Sigmund; "but for all that, I am ready to go, and by so much the more as Thorgerda Shrinebride gave me this good ring as a token of her good will. It has already stood me in good stead more than once."

"How so?" asked the Earl.

"Once," said Sigmund, "in that hard day's fight with Harold Ironskull. It was towards even, when all at once they launched such a

flight of arrows at us as threatened to clear our decks. Then, as my sword arm was raised, a shaft struck the ring, so true in aim, and so sharp in flight, it had passed through the arm into my chest; but it struck the ring, and glanced off and quivered in the deck, and left this great dint in the gold."

"That was a token, indeed," said the Earl; "but what others were there?"

"One more," said Sigmund. "'Twas after we had joined fellowship with Harold that he and I were aboard his war-drake, when before I could get back to my own ship a mighty storm arose, and both ships were driven before it like corks. After a time, while Harold lay in the ship's waist, and I stood on the poop, a great wave came rolling after us, and struck us, and swept the ship from stern to stem. I was carried away into the waist, and was just being washed overboard, when Harold thrust out his hand and caught me by the ring, which ran up towards my shoulder, instead of slipping off, and he held on like a man, and pulled me back over the bulwarks."

"These be tokens indeed," said the Earl, as

they walked to a temple in the wood. "Be sure you never part with that ring, that is to say, until you become a Christian: then it will bring you ill instead of good luck, for the gods change their favour when a man deserts his faith."

As he said these words, they reached the temple garth, and passed into the open space, which was hallowed to the service of the gods. It was not nearly so splendid as the shrine which that niddering Rapp had burned down in Gudbrand's Dale, and still less so than that near "The Barns," in the Drontheim district, which was the Earl's especial place of worship. But rude and humble as it was, the faith of the Earl was plainly above all pomp and ceremony —a thing of the heart, and not of the hands. He crossed the sacred garth with fear and trembling, and entered the little temple with awe. In shape it was like the one which we have already described; but slits in the wood-work, with windows of bladder or horn, supplied the place of glass and talc. The images of all the gods were there, and not one was wanting; but they were mere rude carvings in wood, the

beauty and dignity of which, if they had any, was eked out by the eye of faith.

"Do as you see me do," whispered the Earl; and then he prostrated himself flat on the earthen floor before the hideous image of Thorgerda Shrinebride.

In like manner Sigmund prostrated himself on the earth, and awaited the result.

There the Earl lay, grovelling before his chosen divinity, and, with his face buried in his hands, praying, as Sigmund could see, fervently to her for some sign.

That image, too, bore a gold ring on its arm, like the one, so much more gorgeous, in Gudbrandsdale, which was kept in its position by the curve of its wooden elbow.

After a while, when the Earl had come to the end of his prayers and sobs and ejaculations, he slowly raised his head from his hands, and as he did so, Sigmund could see that now as before his eyes were filled with tears. At last, he uttered out loud the following prayer:

"Tell me, Thorgerda Shrinebride, thou goddess whom I most adore, and whom I have served with sacrifices since my boyhood, tell me

by some sign whether I shall prevail in this struggle with the Vikings of the East, who have invaded this my land of Norway."

After this prayer, which was uttered in a voice of passionate devotion, the Earl raised his eyes, and fixed them steadfastly on the image; but there was no sign, nor any answer by sound or gesture to his prayer.

Then the Earl stretched himself at full length on the earth again, and again buried his face in his hands. At times Sigmund, who was less devotional, and therefore more alive to what was passing, saw that he swayed his body, and moved his head to and fro, as though in deep agony of mind. When this had lasted some minutes, and Sigmund began to be weary of lying on the floor, the Earl raised his head again, and prayed aloud, in a tone almost threatening to his divinity.

"I know not how it is, but the face of heaven seems veiled from me, and the countenance of the ancient gods of the land is turned from me. What king of the North has ever been so faithful in service or sacrifice to the Æsir as I, and this at a time when men boast

that they believe only in themselves, and have impiously left off the worship of the gods. At what time, even at Upsala, the great seat of the worship of the Aesir, have the altars so smoked with sacrifices, or the rings, the sacred rings, been oftener reddened with the gore of victims? All this, and more than this, have I done. Once, indeed, by force, I confessed myself a Christian, to deceive the Emperor of the Germans, and to make my escape, but I had not been an hour on Norwegian soil before I cast off the new faith, as a man casts off an old coat, and slew the silly monks who had come with me, to christen this land. That was a great crime, but it was atoned as soon as ever I could, and since then for years I have been the most constant servant of the gods. Is there anything more that I can do, to show the fervour and constancy of my faith? If so, O Thorgerda Shrimshilde, give me a sign, and stretch out your arm."

As he ended, both the Earl and Sigmund again raised their eyes, and gazed at the wooden image; and to his amazement, Sigmund beheld the rigid arm unbend a little, till the

ring, which was up at the elbow, seemed to slip down to the wrist.

"Thanks, Thorgerda Shrinebride," cried the Earl in rapture. "By this gesture thou showest that there is something more that I may do in this my hour of need, to declare my faith in the ancient gods. The voices of the gods we know are never heard by mortal ears, except in the whistling of the wind, and the roaring of the sea, and above all by the crash of the thunder. What more shall I do? What sacrifice devote? Father, mother, brothers, I have none. Wives I will not mention -the gods love strength and not weakness, else why are not women seated in Valhalla? Nona -"

But just as he had uttered the word "Nona," and before he could end the sentence, the lightning flashed through the narrow window slits, till the Earl and Sigmund were nearly blinded, and a clap of thunder, which seemed to burst over the very temple, crashed in their ears. When they raised their eyes again, they saw that the stiff arm of the image was quite unbent, and the massive golden ring which was

that they believe only in themselves, and have impiously left off the worship of the gods. At what time, even at Upsala, the great seat of the worship of the Æsir, have the altars so smoked with sacrifices, or the rings, the sacred rings, been oftener reddened with the gore of victims? All this, and more than this, have I done. Once, indeed, by force, I confessed myself a Christian, to deceive the Emperor of the Germans, and to make my escape, but I had not been an hour on Norwegian soil before I cast off the new faith, as a man casts off an old coat, and slew the silly monks who had come with me, to christen this land. That was a great crime, but it was atoned as soon as ever I could, and since then for years I have been the most constant servant of the gods. Is there anything more that I can do, to show the fervour and constancy of my faith? If so, O Thorgerda Shrinebride, give me a sign, and stretch out your arm."

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But just as he had uttered the word "Sons," and before he could end the sentence, the lightning flashed through the narrow window slits, till the Earl and Sigmund were nearly blinded, and a clap of thunder, which seemed to burst over the very temple, crashed in their ears. When they raised their eyes again, they saw that the stiff arm of the image was quite unbent, and the massive golden ring which was

on it glided off, and rolled till it touched the out-spread hand of the Earl.

"It is enough," he muttered to Sigmund. "Thou heardest and sawest the sign which followed the word 'Sons.' The gods are angry and hard, and all my sacrifices of beasts and birds have been unavailing. I now know what I have to do. The gods require a noble sacrifice before they will grant me the victory. Not a word of this to any man. Let us hasten hence, but let no man say the ancient gods are dead in Norway, when they answer prayers and invocations so plainly by signs and thunderings."

"'Winter thunder
Is the world's wonder.'"

answered Sigmund. "But let us depart."

So they rose and left the temple, and were soon back at the hall of the grange. Even since their departure, fresh forces, both in men and ships, had come in; and when Earl Hacon looked round on his mighty host, manned by many thousand men, he might well feel that the Vikings, who could snatch Norway from his grasp when he was backed by all the bone

and sinew of the kingdom, must be brave indeed.

It was merry in the hall at Hod that night, though men thought that both the Earl and Sigmund looked dull and careworn. This was put down to their recent quarrel, for it was well known that a strife between such resolute natures was not likely to pass away and leave no sign. No man suspected the real cause of their dulness. The Earl was brooding over the sacrifice which the gods, as he read their will, demanded of him, in the person of his son or sons; while Sigmund was lost in thought as to whether Thorgerda's wooden arm, in that uncertain light, had only seemed to bend instead of really bending. If his eyes had deceived him, all the rest might be accidental; for that clap of thunder, which shook the temple to its foundations, was quite enough to have shaken the image, and make the heavy ring roll off on the floor.

So he remained distracted with doubt, afraid to trust the evidence of his own eyes, and inclined to see in the whole scene nothing but a delusion of the senses. Of one thing, however,